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TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 1832.

GREAT GRENFELL GARDENS BY B. H. BUXTON.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.





# GREAT GRENFELL GARDENS

A NOVEL.

BY

B. H. BUXTON,

AUTHOR OF "JENNIE OF 'THE PRINCE'S,'" "WON!"

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1879.

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GREAT

GREENFELL GARDENS

A NOVEL

BY

M. H. WELLS

Author of "The Time Machine" and "The Man in the Moon"

Illustrated by

W. H. WELLS

Vol. II

Part II

THE END OF THE WORLD

1895

London: George Allen & Unwin



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# GREAT GRENFELL GARDENS.

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## CHAPTER I.

### REACTION.

A SUDDEN and utterly unaccountable rage possessed St. Helier, as that suspicion of some deeper understanding between Estella and Mr. Latimer again flashed into his mind.

With a feeling of savage disappointment he turned his head away, and—confronted Hilda.

She had but just entered the room, and her appearance, clad as she was in the exquisite maize costume, was creating a decided sensation.

St. Helier felt really grateful when he beheld so attractive a diversion for his troubled thoughts. He hastened to meet the Signorina, whom he greeted with eager smiles and compliments.

Estella saw it all, and smiled—smiled all the



more as she turned to Mr. Latimer again, and with an amount of animation which surprised herself, entered into conversation with that gentleman.

“By Jove, she is a splendid creature!” thought Latimer, glancing at her shining eyes and flushing cheeks in undisguised admiration.

A sudden recklessness possessed the girl. She chattered on in a high tone, then laughed aloud, hoping St. Helier would hear her and feel shocked.

Yes, she would far rather know she shocked him, than tolerate the notion that he was totally indifferent to what she said or did or left undone.

As she had succeeded in attracting the surprised attention of most of the people in her vicinity, she could not resist glancing across at St. Helier, to see if he also had remarked her.

But Hilda was evidently engrossing all his attention, as she eagerly spoke to him on some subject which seemed to interest both of them.

All the time Hilda was speaking, however, she was eagerly scanning the crowd about her, for a familiar face she longed to see.

“Ah! there is Estella!” she cried suddenly, and



placing her hand on her companion's arm, drew him across the room to where Estella was standing.

The girls shook hands warmly, and whispered pretty little compliments to one another, which had the rare merit of absolute sincerity.

Estella laid her icily-cold hand into St. Helier's warm fingers, but not one word could she utter in response to his cool "How are you?"

An ominous hush-sh now passed from lip to lip, and temporary silence being thus obtained, the air was rent asunder by a vocal outburst uttered by a delicate-looking Italian, who was appealing to "all the gods" in the gloomiest of *bassi profondi*.

As soon as this melancholy exordium was over, Mrs. Vivian approached the Signorina, and by the express desire of "her ladyship the Countess Dowager," requested Hilda to favour them all with one of her bravura airs.

"What shall I sing?" asked Hilda, nervously appealing to Estella. But Estella did not hear her friend, for she was listening to Mr. Latimer, who proposed then and there to introduce her to the editor of the *Lyre*.



Ronald Vivian, who seldom lost a word which fell from Hilda's lips, now approached her and entreated for the "Jewel" song, from Faust.

Hilda, relieved at not having to decide for herself, nodded acquiescence, and took the arm her modest adorer tremblingly offered, as he asked if he might be permitted to conduct her to the piano.

Signor Scuro was installed there, and Hilda having uttered the first words of her recitative, remembered none of the people about her, but surrendered herself with a genuine and delicious enthusiasm to the untroubled joy of hearing the thrilling tones of the glorious voice, which, as she was wont so gratefully to say, "the good God had given her."

The silence which reigned while Hilda sang, was by no means compulsory. Each member of the motley crowd was more or less amazed and delighted by the power and sweetness of the young Italian's sympathetic voice.

Even young Lord Goselyngge, whose colossal fortune, and well-known mania for the lyric art, gave him facilities for experiments and a wide experience in operatic ventures, stood spell-bound by



the melodious tones of Hilda's fresh voice, which fell upon his ear as he entered the room.

Of Lord Goselyngge, it might truly be said that he was "not such a fool as he looked," and he was certainly and very rapidly aware that this was no common singer on whom he had fortunately lighted, on this his first appearance in Great Grenfell Gardens.

Lord Goselyngge had accepted the Countess's invitation with an unexpressed idea that he was going to visit a "menagerie"—or rather a raree-show,—and, therefore, his lordship was rather startled to find that the first tones that fell on his ear in this assemblage of "savages," were the utterances of so clear and highly-trained a soprano, as neither he nor his factotum, Mr. Giacomo Arrow-smith, had ever been able to discover as yet, in all their searches for a veritable *prima-donna*.

"Old Scuro was right in his judgment, as usual," thought the titled head of the great Diamond Opera Company, perceiving the signor at the piano, and taking in "the situation" at a glance.

Complimenting the Countess on her talent, in



securing an attraction which even *he* envied her, Lord Goselyngge approached the piano, and having been duly presented to the Signorina Santarelli, soon entered into a lively conversation with her.

The listless crowd was moving to and fro in the spacious apartments, commending, smiling, smirking, sneering, as the case might be, until the announcement of supper put them all in motion and sent them doorwards in a consequent stream.

Latimer, who had patiently awaited his opportunity, now hurried towards Estella and offered her his arm.

By common consent they made their way towards the further end of the supper-room, where Mr. Snereton, the editor of the *Lyre*, had already established himself, and was surrounded by a *coterie* of admiring disciples.

Mrs. Toegoode, always eager to pick up crumbs of information from editorial sources, was close at hand, and so was Mr. L'Estrange, who hoped to see certain "Dramatic Essays" he had written, appear in the *Lyre*.

"Mr. Latimer tells me you are writing a novel,



Miss Norman?" said Mr. Snereton, with an amused smile of enquiry.

The attack was so sudden, and was followed by so many other point-blank questions, that the aspiring authoress was frightened out of all coherence.

She did manage, after some absurd hesitation, to inform the condescending editor that she had nearly completed the first volume of a novel, which she intended to call "Gwendolen."

"That title is bad," said the man of experience. "Talk to Mrs. Toegoode, my child—she can put you into the way of *fetching* the public, and it's quite a *spécialité* of Adela-ida's to christen her three-deckers effectively."

"One moment, Mr. Snereton," said the successful authoress, approaching the patronising editor with a bland smile. "I want to introduce my husband to you;" and seeing the look of surprise on the face of the proprietor of the *Lyre*, she added, "I daresay you have considered Mr. Toegoode a sort of male 'Mrs. Harris' hitherto; but here he is to speak for himself."

Here he was, certainly ("and not much to look



at, either," as Mr. Snereton remarked, *sotto voce*), but he did not choose to speak to anyone but his enterprising wife.

To her he said, scowling as he spoke, "It's high time we got home. If you want me to wait for you you'd better look sharp, for I've to be off to Newmarket first train in the morning."

It was a peculiarity of Mr. Toegoode's that he was always going to be off to see either races or trainers, and that he could never manage to find sufficient cash for his travelling expenses without applying to poor hard-working Mrs. Addie for it.

His coming to fetch her from the party to-night was a concession made solely in reference to the money he would require her to give him for his journey.

She had received ten guineas for a story handed in only yesterday, and those ten guineas her husband was determined to secure to-night.

"If you are ready, dear Estella," said the authoress in a far meeker tone than she was wont to use, "we may as well be going, as Mr. Toegoode



does not like to be kept waiting—men never do, you know,” she whispered gently.

“I am quite ready,” said Estella, with an odd tightening feeling at her heart, which almost choked her.

She had just caught sight of Hilda as she sat at the supper-table, radiant with success. A bright flush was on her face, and her eyes shone with extraordinary brilliance.

Lord Goselyngge sat on one side of her, St. Helier on the other. Ronald Vivian, opposite, was watching her with looks of undisguised admiration.

“Poor Nettie,” thought Estella—then added with an audible sigh, “and poor me!”

She had already followed Mrs. Toegoode out of the supper-room, when she felt her hand clasped closely in that of a person who must have followed on her footsteps. It was St. Helier.

“Your father has forbidden you to speak to me?” he whispered hurriedly, “but *must* you be so cruel?”

Before Estella had even time to realise what was being said to her, he had left her side again and



returned to the room which held "that irresistible attraction." . . . . So thought the poor child with such bitterness in her heart as she had never felt before.

Mr. and Mrs. Toegoode had hurried on. She followed quickly.

In a few moments the short drive was over, and Estella was standing alone upon the doorstep of No. 40.

As soon as the door was opened, Estella hastened towards the dining-room, but before she had time to reach it, Nettie was out in the passage to meet her.

"Oh! darling, you are home sooner than I had dared to expect," cried Nettie, flinging her arms around her sister's shoulders, and thus half leading half dragging her into the dining-room.

"Now, Stella, tell me all about it, was it very delightful? I'm not a bit sleepy, and should like to sit up all night and listen to your account of the glories you have seen."

Estella stood pale, silent, unresponsive.

"Dearest, what is it, you don't mean to say you



have not enjoyed yourself?" gasped Nettie, gazing at her sister in unconcealed amazement.

"Enjoyed myself?" echoed Estella, with unmistakable bitterness in her tone. "Oh! Nettie, Nettie! I never spent so wretched an evening in all my life." As she spoke, the rush of her late experiences seemed to overwhelm her, to the exclusion of all comforting thoughts.

The noisy indifferent crowd, her anxious waiting, his coming, the subsequent disappointment, her desperate struggle to force his attention by the hollow mockery of her seeming gaiety; all these, her trials and tribulations, came crowding upon her, and culminated with the cry,

"I am so very, very unhappy, Nettie. I wish I had never been born."

Nettie, heedless, light-hearted Nettie, whose experiences of life might hitherto have fairly been represented as gay as a butterfly's, stood awestruck at this exhibition of sorrow. Real, tearful, unaccountable sorrow, and Estella the sufferer!

"Darling, I am not very wise, and I fear I can't help you; but, oh! do talk. Do tell me what has



happened? You must be better, if you'll only speak to your loving, sorry old Baby."

"I can't speak," sobbed Estella, "but I can cry; and your tenderness comforts me, dear."

Nettie had seated herself now, and Estella fell on her knees at her sister's feet, and burying her head in Nettie's dress, found relief in a passion of tears.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Darling, are you better now?" whispered Nettie softly, after a long long hour's wearying silence.

Estella did not answer, and Nettie, bending down, found that her sister's troubles were all forgotten for a time in a sound and child-like sleep.

---



## CHAPTER II.

## CONFIDENCES.

THAT earnest talk between Hilda and St. Helier, to which Estella, in her jealous apprehension, had attached so much importance, would have caused her little else than amusement had she been able to listen to its details, instead of only watching the outward signs of an interest which seemed to engross the speakers to the exclusion of all that was happening round them.

Indeed, their case was parallel to her own, when she had been utterly absorbed in consulting with Mr. Latimer about her literary work, while St. Helier, still chafing under the novel uncertainty of his position in regard to the Normans, had come into the Gardens, intensely desiring to be reassured by an encouraging word from his favourite Estella, and found that young lady so completely engrossed by



Peregrine Latimer (whom St. Helier *now* began to find exceedingly objectionable), that she could spare neither a word nor even a smile for the jealous spectator.

Unconsciously, and most certainly without any unkind intention, St. Helier had avenged himself for the misery he had endured that afternoon in the Gardens by the suffering he caused her as she watched his glad reception of Hilda and their subsequent most confidential intercourse.

If only her ears had served her as well as her observant eyes. . . .

"You have come very late," St. Helier said, as soon as he had complimented the Signorina on the success of her Parisian toilette.

Hilda made no verbal reply, but slightly shrugged her shoulders and pressed up her lips into something very like a pout.

"I do not have a very good time in the house of Miss Theodosia," she said, after this significant silence.

"What is wrong? Don't they treat you well?" asked St. Helier in evident perplexity.



He was disturbed by a sudden sense of trouble and annoyance, and most uncomfortably reminded of the trouble he had endured about the period of Hilda's first introduction to Miss Theodosia, and during a certain very trying interview with the irate father of Estella.

Hilda, who was keenly sensitive, watched the clouds ominously gathering upon the thoughtful face of her much-esteemed friend, and instantly resolved to spare him any further trouble by passing over her grievances as lightly as possible.

"You must not distress yourself, not in the very least," she said eagerly. "Perhaps the fault is mine, and I have foolishly exaggerated my little trouble. Indeed, the old mother is most good and kind and amiable, and she shows me every consideration, but with Miss Theodosia all things are, I find, very difficult, and I fear she has by nature rather a naughty character."

"She is vicious and a snob, I know," said St. Helier crossly; "but I cannot for the life of me see how her personal qualities can in any sense interfere with you."



Hilda, noticing his vexed tone, instantly added, with a humility that was almost pathetic,

“Indeed I do not think I am in fault, but she is really often quite cruel to me, and I am sure for some reason which I cannot even guess she does quite *hate* me.”

“Heavens!” cried St. Helier, “how came so wild a notion into your head, my poor child?”

It did indeed appear impossible to him that any one could regard this sensitive, soft-eyed queen of song with any but the friendliest feelings.

“It is no wild notion—I wish I could so delude myself—it is the simple, but the rather hard truth,” said Hilda, compressing her lips as though determined to let no further complaint escape them.

“You are unhappy then. Tell me in what manner I can help you, my dear girl?” said St. Helier, whose compassion was aroused by the wistful and pained expression of the Signorina’s tell-tale face.

She was silent for awhile, gravely reflecting over their relative positions, and painfully aware that none of his former eagerness to help her was



animating him now. Only a sort of forced compassion, such as he, being naturally kind-hearted, would, of course, incline to give to any one who seemed to be in trouble.

"You can do nothing, nothing more; indeed you have done all a good friend could do for me already, *amico mio*," she answered, naturally lapsing into Italian as her words became tender.

For to the dear *padre* the simple art-collector, so far away in Rome, Hilda always spoke and wrote in his own language, although her dead mother had taught her English so efficiently.

Her life had hitherto been spent in the artistic culture of her voice, and in the learning of that stage deportment which to an operatic singer is a *sine quâ non*.

Indeed she had devoted herself wholly to the fulfilment of the duties which she considered as of the utmost importance. And one of these was the care of her father's modest little home.

As yet, therefore, she had fortunately had but a very slight experience of what is called "worldly knowledge."



To study singing thoroughly, and to fulfil the duties of her position as the mistress of her father's household, had been the alpha and omega of her young life. Now that she found herself among strangers, with widening ideas and novel experiences thrusting themselves upon her, day after day, she was frequently puzzled and at a loss to account for the varying emotions in others, which acted and reacted so strangely upon herself.

In all the turmoil of her new manner of life, however, there remained to her certain firmly established facts to which she could still cling, and these now appeared to her like life-buoys in a changeable sea.

Her love for her father and her faith in him, was firm as a rock, in itself.

And then there was another comfort in her strong admiration for, and trust in, Mr. St. Helier.

Towards Estella and her sisters Hilda felt herself much attracted; to the former especially, but Theodosia awakened a decided antipathy in the young stranger, from the first hour of their meeting.

Miss Braun herself had never been amiably dis-



posed towards the Signorina, whose attractive manners and marvellous voice she envied and feared.

Hitherto Mr. Latimer had been Theodosia's devoted and persistent admirer, and when Mrs. Braun began to cool towards the boarder whose account remained so long unsettled, it was Theodosia who argued the matter with her dear mamma, and managed to obtain that lady's acquiescence in granting Mr. Latimer still more time.

Latimer, keenly alive to his own interests always, was perfectly aware of the pleading and counter-pleading which had taken place between mother and daughter on his account.

And in his own "noble" way, he expressed the gratitude with which Theodosia's "delicate consideration" had inspired him. More than that, he unburdened his mind to her privately, and with an understanding that his confidence must be respected, and his affairs told to "no other living being," he enlightened Theodosia on the great Anti-Bee scheme, in the starting of which he had just now launched all his available capital.

Many and many a long confabulation took place



on this subject between the heiress, Miss Braun, and the speculator, Mr. Latimer.

It will be readily understood that the ambitious young lady managed to feel her way towards obtaining an invitation for the Dowager's At-Home, at the same time. How Latimer fed her hopes with unreliable promises has been shown.

So great was poor Dosie's chagrin when the 15th actually arrived without bringing her the anticipated card, that in a fit of irrepressible annoyance she sought her mother, and in a hard dry voice told her "to do her worst to *that* Mr. Latimer; summons him if she chose."

Mrs. Braun whose maternal sympathy at once led her to infer that Theodosia's feelings had been wounded in some matter quite alien to the great question of regular payments, prepared herself for a decisive interview with Mr. Latimer, with whom she requested "a little private conversation in the dining-room."

"I have a business call to make, dear Madame Braun, if you will kindly excuse me," pleaded Latimer, but seeing an ominous frown upon the old



lady's usually placid face, he added, "I will return as the clock strikes two, I give you my word, madam, and I regret the delay."

It was the 15th, and before granting Madame Braun an interview which might be indefinitely prolonged, Latimer resolved to keep his prior appointment with Mrs. Vivian.

He found that lady radiant in the possession of the crisp banknotes, for which she had just called at her bankers'.

She was quite prepared at once to hand over a considerable number of these to the Honorary Secretary of that marvellous and thriving Anti-Bee scheme.

"I read of it everywhere," she said enthusiastically. "It's in the *Times* and the *Telegraph* every day, and the company must pay away a fortune in its attractive advertisements."

"The company has a fortune to do what it likes with, you see," said Latimer confidentially. "And to prove to you how thoroughly you, a lady of means and high position, are honoured for your spirit of independent enterprise, I have ventured to bring you a



letter, addressed to you by one of our directors, who saw me making out the necessary form of receipt for your money."

Mrs. Vivian glanced up expectantly.

"Is the letter from a lord?" she asked.

"It is from Sir Fulsome Venture," answered Latimer, who pronounced the name as though it were spelt with plums.

With the letter the form of receipt was produced from the capacious breast-pocket into which Mrs. Vivian's £2000 presently found their way.

The clock struck two as Mr. Latimer entered Mrs. Braun's establishment, and he found that good lady in the hall, directing the unskilful efforts of a new parlour maid.

"I am punctual, dear madam, you see," said Latimer with his most genial smile.

"The luncheon is ready, so we will go to it, before we talk together," said Mrs. Braun, but the usual expression of good humour was not on her face as she spoke.

"As you please, madam," replied Latimer, offering his arm to the old lady with a profound bow.



"I hope your little account is ready for me?" he whispered interrogatively.

"It is a big bill now, for I have had to wait four entire months for my money," answered Mrs. Braun, not in a whisper.

Theodosia, standing by the dining-room window waiting for her mother, saw and heard what was going on. She was actually trembling with anxiety, and if Mr. Latimer had looked at her he would have seen a pitiful appeal in her glance.

But he was thinking of her mother at the moment, to whom he now said very confidentially,

"Can I really have been so remiss, my dear madam? Believe me, I am thoroughly ashamed of myself; but, oh! why did you not remind me of my obligation?"

"De bills was sent up regular, and I should have spoke long before dis time—" commenced Mrs. Braun, but catching sight of Theodosia's uplifted finger, stopped herself suddenly.

"I can best prove my regret at this ridiculous delay, by immediate payment, now I am reminded of my omission," said Latimer readily, and added



in a more audible tone, "We will commence our private conversation with a complete *règlement* of our little accounts, if you please, madam."

Hilda now entered the dining-room, followed by some of the other "guests," and nothing further transpired about Mr. Latimer's accounts, which he settled in full, directly luncheon was over.

Theodosia felt that she had made a fatal mistake in allowing her mother to importune this noble creature, who had so many pressing claims on his time and attention. And Peregrine quite intended that Miss Dosie should realise his displeasure, though he never addressed a word to her on the subject.

Her most severe punishment soon followed, however, for Latimer tore up an invitation-card in her presence, which he said the Dowager had kindly given him that morning to fill up as he chose.

"I know no one who would care to go at so short a notice," he said indifferently, flinging the bits of cardboard into the waste-paper basket.

Theodosia had watched him in speechless agony; but no sooner had he left the room, than her ill-



repressed vexation vented itself on innocent Hilda, who was making up maize bows for her shoes.

"Did you ask Mr. Latimer not to invite me for to-night, Signorina?" asked Dosie, with angry reproach in her eyes and her voice.

"How can you ask it?" said Hilda, with serious deprecation in her look and tone.

She was not astonished by the other's harsh manner, in which she had already had some trying experience.

Theodosia, who, as we have seen, was baffled in all her schemes, and had the additional mortification of having deeply offended the man she so much admired, allowed her angry feelings to get the better of her judgment, and said so many cruel and bitter things to poor Hilda, that she, single-hearted and noble of purpose herself, was quite unable to account for these vagaries.

She did not in the least understand that she was but the hapless scapegoat on whom Dosie chose to vent a wrath which had its origin in her own discomfiture, and not in any deed of Hilda's.

This conduct of Miss Braun's, however, con-



vinced the Italian that it was quite time she should seek a home elsewhere; and full of this fresh resolve, she met Mr. St. Helier at the Countess's party, and immediately unburdened her mind to her trusted friend and counsellor, who, in this case, felt himself entirely at a loss what to propose, and how to provide for the lonely girl, whose position now appeared to be more than ever complicated.

On one point, however, St. Helier was firmly resolved.

Nothing should ever again induce him in any sense to become responsible for this unprotected stranger.

---



## CHAPTER III.

## CONFLICT.

ALTHOUGH St. Helier had arrived at so fixed a resolution in regard to his future neutral position, *vis-à-vis* the Signorina, he could not all at once sever his thoughts from the object which had so long occupied a very prominent position in them.

He had found her especially charming this evening, and though the confidences she had so naïvely whispered to him were in themselves of a most irritating nature, he had thought it very delightful to listen to the soft melodious tones in which the poor child told her grievances to him.

And then she had left his side for a while and had stood apart from the crowd thronging around her, and had sung——what word in the rich vocabulary of praise and admiration could convey the faintest idea of *how* she had sung? . . . The echoes



of her glorious voice were still thrilling in his memory as he quitted the scene of the evening's varied festivities, and slowly wended his way to his solitary home.

He had held "social gatherings" of all kinds in special abhorrence for many a long year past, and his acceptance of the Dowager's polite invitation had considerably puzzled himself.

He did not regret that he had gone; on the contrary there had been certain incidents in this evening which he would on no account have missed.

He was quietly thinking over all that had occurred as he leisurely strolled across the deserted Gardens and up the incline of the Grove.

It was a sweet still summer night, peaceful and balmy.

The soft fragrant air was most deliciously welcome after the intolerable heat and glare and din of the Countess' crowded and gaslit rooms.

St. Helier was peculiarly sensitive to exterior influences. Those who knew him best had sometimes told him that he was as fantastic, or as ridiculous, or as touchy as a woman.



Certainly, Estella herself could not have felt more gratified by the soft sympathy of the dim starlit night—than St. Helier did, as he took off his hat and lifted his head in silent contemplation of the vast star-spangled vault above.

He had come forth feverish, restless, disturbed, a prey to contradictory impressions, perplexed himself; and consequently dissatisfied with the rest of mankind.

It was not mankind though which troubled and perverted his thoughts at this moment; it was their varying and unaccountable nature in regard to the two women who seemed of late to have effectually disturbed the methodical and isolated existence into which he, snail-like, had voluntarily withdrawn himself.

Why did those two girls Hilda and Estella persist in haunting him either with visions of their charming faces, or with still subtler memories of their voices or their words?

He had felt terribly (ridiculously he would have said) pained by what he considered Estella's marked



avoidance of him throughout this evening. He surely had never offended her personally, and there was a time not so very long ago when he had hoped. . . .

Ah! whatever he had been fool enough to hope then, must have come to a very sudden end since. That was evident from the girl's changed manner. Could fathers really regulate their daughters' feelings in this despotic fashion? Had Estella once thought,—thought much and kindly of him as he supposed, and had she then, in marvellous obedience to her parent's tyrannical behest, ceased thinking of him at all?

How bright, how lovely, how lovable she had looked to-night in her dainty white attire, how piquante she was in all she said and did!

It seemed a pity though that she should bestow so many of her arch glances, so many of her whispered words on that brute Latimer. He was cast in a coarse uncouth mould, he could not appreciate the delicate *nuances* of her varying emotions and impressions. He would be sure to misunderstand the naïve confidence with which it was her wont to treat all men and then——



“D—— Latimer!” St. Helier exclaimed, as his thoughts arrived at this unpropitious climax.

Even the soothing influence of the balmy night-air was forgotten as he remembered the smile with which Estella had greeted his—his rival? preposterous! He had finished that part of his life in which women and jealousies and rivals played their important parts so very many years ago.

He had loved a woman once, foolishly, passionately, blindly. That was in his youth,—how many years ago? And she, into whose keeping he had given his faith, his love, his entire devotion and—his honour—had cruelly, wickedly, pitilessly shamed and deceived him.

Was it likely that he would ever trust his happiness in the frail hands of any woman again?

No. Kitty O'Neill should continue to minister to his comfort, to his solitary and most delightful home, and to his general well-being.

Kitty was a good and a clever old woman, and she had helped to free him from the toils of the unscrupulous Delilah who had bound him hand and



foot, body and soul. Kitty O'Neill was the right sort of person for a man to trust in.

And one of these days he would go up into Yorkshire and see his good, his noble mother, who lived such a pure and holy life away from the world—the cold selfish world, and he would take heart of grace, and tell her the whole story of his chequered life, and ask her to counsel and advise him.

The confirmed bachelor laughed aloud as he arrived at this dubious point in his fantastic and introspective voyage of discovery. Did he intend to go to his mother, his dear good guileless mother and ask her if she thought him too old or too *blasé* or too much hampered by the cruel recollections of his misspent youth, to allow thoughts of love and hope and matrimony to enter into his heart and life again? What was all this meandering and rhodomontade that had taken possession of him to-night?

The Countess' champagne was not good and he had not touched it, nor the claret nor the sherry. He was far too cautious to risk the headache which



invariably followed on the imbibing of unknown brands and nameless vintages. Perhaps he was in his dotage already, or was his brain a little bewildered by the bright eyes and the heated rooms?

Estella, asleep and exhausted at Nettie's feet, little dreamt of the perplexed wanderer without the Gardens, who was marching aimlessly to and fro in close vicinity to No. 40, moved by the dominant desire to forget her altogether.

She had told him so much about her work, dear industrious little girl. Perhaps, when *she* was troubled and perplexed, she took refuge in her novel writing?

Work!—why should not he follow so good, so excellent an example? He had been very remiss in his attendance at Chambers of late, and his partner had addressed several slightly critical MSS. to the Grove.

He knew he had been idling much of his time away, so much that one of the Grenfellians had utterly refused to credit that he not only had a profession, but himself considered that he actually followed it.



His visit to Rome had been too thorough a relaxation. He had contracted indolent habits while he was *en voyage*, and on his return he had had the care of Hilda, and there had been all that misunderstanding and fuss and bother. . . .

No. That sort of thing most certainly should not be repeated. One of its bitterest and most aggravating consequences was causing him perpetual pain and anxiety still.

Estella and he might have uninterruptedly continued that friendship which began so auspiciously, if there had not been a seemingly sufficient reason for Mr. Norman's suspicious displeasure.

Alas! How ready the world still was to misconstrue the motives and the actions of women—and of men!

In his present mood, St. Helier somewhat irrelevantly assured himself that the most blameless actions were always those which met with the severest censure.

He had entered his tranquil home by this time, and he somewhat impatiently flung back the vene-



tian shutters and opened the windows of his library wide.

The night without was as quiet as the untenanted rooms he now traversed; far too restless to think of going up to his bed, and therefore determined to make himself as comfortable as might be under the circumstances, he wheeled his favourite arm-chair close to the open window, and placed the table which held his reading-lamp, a bowl of ice, some soda-water, and a spirit-flask, ready at his elbow.

Then he went over to the rack in which his letters were always placed during his absence, and noticed that the evening post had supplied him with quite an unusual number of epistles on this occasion.

He glanced at the superscriptions indifferently, and selected three which he thought he might as well open to-night.

But first his pipe, the calumet of peace, must be lighted.

As he inhaled the first fragrant whiff of the



bird's-eye called golden, and which he specially affected, he smiled again, and quite without bitterness this time.

It occurred to him to wonder if Estella would open her eyes very wide, or if she would screw up her red lips in disgust if she should see him thus taking his ease with a pipe in his mouth?

Hilda had lighted both his and her father's times out of number when they were all in Rome together, and had not been in the least surprised to find how thoroughly both men enjoyed their smoke.

And sometimes she had even sung to them as they sat in peaceful puffing silence; and she had never given herself any airs—not even pretending that the tobacco choked her or made her cough, as other women did.

Yes, Hilda was a sweet-tempered, pleasant companion, and her un-English bringing-up had freed her from that conventional *exigeance* which the truly British female regards as her especial privilege.

In the presence of the Norman girls St. Helier



would never have dreamt of producing a cigar-*case* even, whereas Hilda herself would always and readily have supplied him with the meerscham and the tobacco jar, which mostly played an important part in his quiet evenings.

While indulging in these purposeless reflections, his hand had mechanically fallen upon the selected letters again, and he opened the first, which was a document of very businesslike appearance.

It was the synopsis of an intricate case which his partner had forwarded to him as deserving of his personal and immediate attention.

He read the lengthy statement through very carefully, and the lawyer within him rejoiced at the perplexing mystery and puzzling contradictions which gradually presented themselves to his mental vision.

"I'll take that brief myself," he decided, "it will give me some wholesome occupation again, and it's just for the want of that I'm doing so badly now."

It was a breach of promise case, and the plain-



tiff was a young and attractive lady aged eighteen. . . . .

How he would like to tell Estella the amusing details of such a case! How quickly she would apprehend them all! What a pleasure it was to talk to a girl who had so trained her mind, that thinking had become an exercise and a delight to her.

She would not only enjoy hearing his forensic exposition of the cases brought to his notice, but she would also be quite able to appreciate the science with which he always sought to handle his subjects; and then, by way of mutual recreation, they would convert *cases* into plots, and those plots she could use for her novels, while he also should zealously endeavour to work. . . . As regarded her, those were very, very visionary castles he was building in the future. But for himself, he must and he would leave off dreaming, and he would settle to his professional duties again, the very next morning.

Too long had he played the truant already, but



now he would return to his work, work he had until very lately gloried in, and which he had always performed to the very best of his ability, keenly enjoying those difficulties which necessitated the exercise of the patience, and perspicacity, which so eminently characterised him in his professional career.

“If a man is busy, and busy about his duty, what more does he require for time or for eternity?”

Before he journeyed to Rome, St. Helier had sedulously striven to act up to that dutiful standard expressed in Charles Kingsley’s suggestive words, but since his return to London. . . . Bah! had he forgotten his manhood, that he should be vainly philandering thus?

To-morrow, yes, to-morrow he would start afresh, and then no more time should be wasted in these meaningless rhapsodies, about two children.

He was quite an old man now, and his hair was turning very grey, what could he have in common with girls in their teens? Well, his smoke and think had pacified him; he could go to bed now with a chance of some hours’ sleep. But stay, there was



another letter for him to read first, not a business communication this, but a thin epistle written on foreign paper and in a small crabbed Italian hand, a long expected letter from Hilda's father, his good old friend, the Signor Santarelli.

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## CHAPTER IV.

## THE ROMAN LETTER AND THE ENIGMA.

Rome, June 12th.

My Good Friend,—

Hilda writes to me often, of course, and her letters teem with your praises.

She speaks of her *maestro* also, of her voice, her many new friends, and her surroundings generally. The refrain of all her news, however, is invariably “that kind, or that generous, or that noble Mr. St. Helier.”

This devotion to you, much as it must please me knowing and esteeming you as I do, at the same time fills me with self-reproach.

You are surprised, and ask me *why* it is a trouble to me, that my only and beloved child should share my affection for the man I most esteem in this world, where few have appeared to me deserving of lasting regard?



I am writing this letter to explain my reasons to you, and I will leave it to you to decide whether or not they are valid, and also what course you deem it advisable to pursue under these circumstances.

There is, in return for my perfect confidence, one favour which I dare venture to ask of you.

Do not permit my letter to influence your personal conduct in any way.

Above all things, do not attempt to coerce yourself into imagining that the compassionate sympathy which my words may arouse in your heart, might pass muster for a warmer—a tenderer feeling.

That would be a terrible mistake; indeed, the *second* grave error of your life, and this time a fatal, because an irretrievable one.

When St. Helier had carefully read so much of his old friend's letter, and paid especial attention to the last paragraph, which was underlined to make it the more impressive, he paused for a moment in evident bewilderment, and then instinctively adjusted



the wick of his reading-lamp, as though that would help to throw some light upon the subject.

Finally he returned to the letter again, hoping that its continued perusal would give him a clearer insight into the thoughts which must have been perplexing the poor old Signor's brain, while he slowly traced them in his small and crabbed writing.

When you were staying here in Rome with us you met Mrs. Vivian and her young son Ronald.

He is deeply in love with my daughter, and has repeatedly besought her to become his wife. He has also appealed to me for my consent, and has asked me to plead his cause with my dear child. As I like and esteem this handsome and attractive youth, I did urge Hilda to listen favourably to him, sure as I was that he would make her an excellent, a most devoted husband. But at first, neither his prayers nor mine were of any avail.

Time, which in these cases mostly works wonders, was not granted us, for just at this critical moment, Madame Vivian, who has not very fine sympathies,



unfortunately offended my Hilda, who is proud and sensitive.

What their disagreement was I do not exactly know; but you, who are acquainted with both the women, will readily understand that they could never have agreed.

After that breach, Hilda refused to see either Ronald or his arrogant mother.

It was the first time my child had ever decidedly opposed me, and we both suffered much pain in consequence.

All this happened shortly before your arrival here.

And Ronald, who is still very young and perhaps morbidly sensitive, had so tormented himself about my girl's refusal to see him, that he fell seriously ill, and seemed quite unable to rouse himself, or to receive any sort of consolation.

He swore to his mother that he was dying, and that he longed to die for Hilda's sake. . . .

Men don't die of love, as you and I both know, my dear Everard; but this lad certainly pined and fretted and wasted himself to a shadow.



Then the true spirit was aroused in the mother. She came to my girl quite humbly, and prayed her to lend a more willing ear to poor Ronald's pleading.

Hilda, touched by the other's gentleness, yielded—

"Good God!" exclaimed St. Helier, and the letter fell from his uplifted hand.

"So she has actually pledged herself to Ronald Vivian!" he muttered, and his face looked blank and woe-begone as he realised the surprising fact. . . .

But, that being the case, what could Santarelli have meant by that rigmarole in the commencement of the letter about sympathy and compassion and warm and tender feelings?

St. Helier was fairly puzzled now, having previously put a construction of his own upon all those mysterious phrases.

The letter had fallen from his hand as he had read that startling word *yielded*, which happened to close the last line on the third page.

"What further does my old friend say in the



way of general contradiction?" he mused, and leisurely returning to the discarded epistle recommenced its perusal at the top of the last page.

Hilda, touched by the other's gentleness, yielded—to a certain degree.

*She promised to bind herself to no other lover by any word or pledge until after her début at the Opera.*

Then Ronald, in a sudden revulsion of feeling, began to rejoice, and hope once more filled the young heart, which but a short time before had been ready to perish in the bitterness of its first despair. . . .

Ah! my good Everard, to us men of the world who have lived through all this so many years ago, it seems too ludicrous, and yet time was when we also may have felt it a matter of life and death.

You see I talk to you so much *en bon camarade*, that I forget *my* age, and most unwarrantably double yours.

Will you forgive me this injustice and also my prolixity? I have very nearly completed my task now, and think I have fairly described to you the



exact state of affairs here, when *you* appeared in our midst.

You know how Hilda pleaded to follow her *maestro* to London, and you know how I, acting under your kind advice and offers of assistance, was brought to consent.

I completely abstained from all mention of young Ronald's love and hopes while you were here, because Hilda most earnestly implored me not to speak of the matter to you at all.

This she did when you had been with us a week, on the Sunday evening after her first serious conversation with you.

I had no idea of the motive which prompted her to this reserve then, though now it has dawned upon me.

"Why doesn't he explain?" muttered St. Helier, "I hate enigmas."

But the wistful gleam in his eyes, as he commented thus, betrayed keen satisfaction rather than wearying doubt.

Further details, questions, and suggestions were



contained in the Signor's lengthy and exhaustive epistle, which was continued on a second closely-written sheet. But St. Helier's interest in it ceased, as he came to the end of that fourth page which concluded with what he was pleased to designate as an enigma.



CHAPTER V.

"NIGHT BRINGETH COUNSEL."

ESTELLA'S sudden though profound sleep, on the ground at her sister's feet, had been the natural result of utter exhaustion, both mental and physical.

The poor girl had literally been over-wrought, in consequence of the successive and contending emotions she had lived through on the momentous occasion, which really was her *début* in London society.

The loneliness of her position in that great busy, chattering, restless crowd of strangers, had of course enhanced what she had soon realised to be an ordeal. . . .

If only dear, calm, restful Mary had been there, the mere fact of whose presence always brought assurance with it; or joyous chattering Nettie, who



would have clung to her arm and made her laugh where, alone and unsympathised with, it had been very hard to her to keep from crying.

Mrs. Toegoode had been particularly kind and considerate, Estella knew, but Mrs. Toegoode was as yet a mere stranger to her, of whom she really knew little more than she did of the rest of that seething, pushing, preoccupied crowd of "celebrities."

And Mrs. Toegoode very naturally looked upon such an assembly as that at the Dowager's, from a business or professional point of view.

"Adela-ida is seeking whom she may devour, as usual," Estella had heard one large bold-eyed woman remarking to a thin and sallow literary "sister," as Mrs. Toegoode possessed herself of the arm of the editor of the *Sphere*, into whose not unwilling ear she was evidently whispering some flattering confidences.

How bitter and jealous and cruel women seem to be to one another, Estella had thought with a kind of instinctive reproach to her sex. She felt



quite sure, for her own part, that if once her brain's work entitled her to a place in the profession of the *literati*, she would feel in complete harmony with all the other members, men or women, and would at all times be only too thankful to lend a helping hand to a novice if she had either the chance or the power to give such assistance.

Mrs. Toegoode before parting with the girl had very considerately volunteered to look over Estella's MS. and advise her as to what she had better do with it. This kindness on the over-worked authoress's part had, of course, lent additional zest to Estella's kind feeling towards her chaperon, and yet the poor child had felt herself thoroughly miserable, friendless, and isolated in the midst of some real but far more fictitious gaiety.

Under other circumstances than those which perplexed and distressed her last night, Estella would naturally have turned to Hilda for the comfort of companionship. But Hilda, she thought ruefully, was, of course, very much better engaged in whispering and listening to Mr. St. Helier, and



had neither time nor attention to spare for her lonely and *forsaken* friend.

Why Estella should have so commiseratingly styled herself forsaken, she herself might have been at a loss to explain the next morning, but at night things always do look dark. . . .

This was the girl's practical conclusion as she lay tossing in her bed, wakeful, despondent, thoroughly dissatisfied with herself, and therefore with the rest of the world.

Nettie had very tenderly aroused her from that first heavy slumber which had followed as closely on her sobs as used to be the case in the days of her childhood, when the result of trouble, temper, or tears, always was what nurse had called "a healing, wholesome sleep."

Scarcely awakened by Nettie's timid exhortation to rise and come upstairs to bed, poor Estella had allowed herself to be led up into her own little "den," where Nettie soon managed to settle her safely in the pink-curtained bed. And there, restlessly tossing, Estella had passed most of the events of the evening in very dreary review.



The first faint glimmer of dawn began stealthily to creep in through the interstices of the venetian blinds before Estella once more forgot her troubles in sleep, which, coming naturally at last, was thoroughly invigorating and refreshing.

\* \* \* \* \*

The welcome light of the glad summer morning was filling her room with its golden splendour, when the loud clanging of the dressing-bell aroused Estella to consciousness again.

But her first waking thoughts were very different to those last dismal and despondent ones, which had not left her, "while the dark night made all things dark to look upon."

As she sat up in her little pink-curtained bed now, shading her eyes from the too brilliant morning light, her mind instantly reverted to the few moments of mysterious but unalloyed delight which had been vouchsafed to her on the previous evening.

She remembered the hurried, strange perplexing words which St. Helier had whispered to her, as he had so unexpectedly followed her out of the supper-room last night.



Surely, he had seized her hand, and he had held it closely clasped in his—and he had called her cruel; yes, that was the word he had used.

She seemed to hear it whispered in her ear once more, with the same lingering reproachful inflexions of his 'voice, which had thrilled her when he spoke it first.

And then, after a bewildering pause, in which she felt his breath upon her cheek and heard her own heart beating audibly—he had said something more, something about her father's forbidding her to speak to him.

Who could have told him anything about that wretched misunderstanding?

No one. She felt more than ever sure on that head now; for only Mary, Nettie, and herself knew of it, and she knew she could rely implicitly on their silence and discretion.

She surely could not have dreamt all about that mysterious little episode?

Could St. Helier's perplexing words and looks and tones have all been conjured up by her overwrought imagination?



No. He had spoken thus, and looked thus, and he had clasped and held her hand—it was all real, and she was—oh! so thankful—that it had happened; for it seemed to prove that he could still give her some of his thoughts and some of his attention, though, of course, Hilda had the greatest claim on both.

Well, it was less hard to think that it was good, generous Hilda who was thus blessed, than it would have been had the favoured one been some unsympathetic stranger, thought poor Estella, conscientiously striving to ignore herself altogether.

Hilda was good and sweet, and kind and affectionate, and after all she could not be so very happy, quite alone in this great unsympathetic crowd of Londoners.

Still, with that glorious, all-enchancing voice, and assured of St. Helier's devotion, what mattered loneliness or a crowd?

Surely, neither home nor sisters nor other congenial society would be missed, if one had such a fund of content within oneself.



"I would change places with her—yield my circumstances for hers gladly, eagerly—without one moment's hesitation," Estella murmured, concluding her morning meditation very suddenly as the breakfast-bell reminded her that hurry-scurry was now the order of the day, since she had not even taken her matutinal plunge as yet, and father objected to beginning his breakfast without the full complement of his daughters.

"And were you pleased with your entertainment last night, Stella?" asked Mr. Norman, smiling affectionately at his daughter, whose hasty toilet had but served to heighten the natural brightness of her eyes and her complexion.

Nettie glanced wistfully up at Estella, whom she had last seen so wan and so painfully weary.

Then the Baby had tenderly coaxed and striven to comfort her sad sister, the nature of whose troubles—during a crowded *soirée* at a Countess's!—seemed so utterly inexplicable to joyous, honey-sipping, flighty Nettie.

Now she glanced up, prepared to behold the same pale, drawn face, with its reddened eyelids



which had sobered her into profound though uncomprehending compassion in the darkest hour of the short summer night.

But the past month, which had developed Nettie's powers of observation, had taught Estella a certain reticence and discretion, which stood her in good stead now.

By neither word nor look did she allude to those secret griefs, for which she knew her father and Mary could not possibly have either comprehension or sympathy.

In reply to her father's enquiries, she answered glibly and with a happy smile, that she had been amused exceedingly; that some of the people were very interesting, especially the two notable editors, who carried on such a vivacious, wordy, and protracted duel; and that the two authoresses of the sensational and of the voluptuous school had not impressed her favourably at all.

Hilda, she said, was exquisitely dressed, was looking her very best; had sung admirably, and evidently made a complete conquest of Lord Gose-



lyngge, who seemed enraptured with her voice and her finished delivery.

The Countess, she thought—perhaps it was very impertinent on her part to make such hazardous remark,—but she really had thought that the Countess was not—not very lady-like.

Nettie glanced at her conservative father in some alarm at these ill-considered words of her rash sister, but Mr. Norman, instead of frowning, laughed approvingly. “I am glad to find you have such power of discrimination, my dear Estella,” said he. “Neither a title nor money can give birth, birth and breeding.

“The late Earl, when young and foolish, stooped—stooped very low for the wife who is the mother of the present Earl, and whose station, therefore, commands our respect, even if her manners do not inspire it. I have, of course, made it my business to inquire fully into this matter before I could permit any one of you girls to enter her ladyship’s house. And I have assured myself that it is in manners only her ladyship is wanting, her character is now, as it has been ever since her marriage, above suspicion.”



Mr. Norman was certainly very partial to the sound of his own voice, and quite enjoyed the giving of exhaustive explanations on every conceivable subject and occasion.

Mary, who in some slight degree inherited this verbose predilection of her father's, was yet the first to check his indulgence in it, which she mostly contrived to do by adroitly diverting his attention from a subject which threatened to lead to a *flux de mots*.

"You have not said a word about Mrs. Toegoode, Estella; was she amiable?" Mary hastily enquired, as soon as her father's momentary pause enabled her to speak without precisely interrupting him.

"Indeed, yes, she was quite charming," answered Estella readily. "She is a much nicer woman than any of you give her credit for, and she certainly was very good to me all the evening."

"I told her a great deal more about my book than I ever ventured to do before, and I quite managed to make her understand that my writing isn't just done by way of amusement; but that it is real hard, honest work; that I care far more for it than for parties and dances and dresses, and all that sort of



young ladies' diversion." (Estella's sublime contempt for the congenial pursuits of her age and class was highly edifying to listen to). "And Mrs. Toe-goode believed me, she knew I was in earnest; and what is better still, she promised to help me with my book herself, and told me to go over and see her this morning, when she intends to give me some useful advice and practical hints."

Seeing the "signs of a coming storm" in her father's twitching eyebrows, Estella added in quick entreaty—"You must not say I'm not to go, father dear, please. She really is a good, kind-hearted woman, and thoroughly understands the practical part of her profession, too. Mr. Snereton himself advised me to apply to her for useful information, and I know if I *do* write, you would be the first to desire that I should be thoroughly acquainted with every detail of my profession."

Estella certainly was endowed with that essentially womanly tact, which enables its possessor to put the man from whom she desired a concession into a thoroughly good temper with himself, by con-



vincing him that his words of wisdom have been listened to and cherished.

"If poor Mrs. Toegoode's husband is a gambler, and a spendthrift, and a lazy——"

"Good-for-nothing fellow!" suggested Nettie officiously.

"That cannot possibly hurt *me*, you know!" continued Estella, far too much preoccupied to take any notice of her sister's interpolation.

"I only desire to see Adela-ida on *business*, and to receive the necessary instruction in rule and routine which every profession demands.

"When you, all of you, see my first novel in print, you will thoroughly appreciate the benefit I have derived from this official interview with the kind and experienced writer, who has offered me, a novice, some necessary assistance." Estella's face was so radiant as she dwelt upon the visionary prospect of her ultimate literary success, that even Mr. Norman began to *believe* in its possibility and felt his paternal heart warming at the prospect of being known as the father of "that new authoress, a charming girl, you know," etc. etc.



So far once a young prophet did receive honour "in her own country," and by way of lending point to the contradiction, the homage was tendered before it was merited.

"You certainly are neither a chatterbox nor a gossip, my dear," said Mr. Norman, graciously returning to the matter under discussion, "and I really don't think this gushing female will do you any harm. It is not so much on her own account I object to her, as on that of her manifold and doubtful acquaintances."

"I'll promise to take my departure the moment the visitors' bell is heard," cried Estella, in high glee at obtaining her father's consent so readily. "Mr. Toegoode goes off to Newmarket at ten," she added; "so I was told to present myself at eleven."

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CHAPTER VI.

"I DARE NOT."

"MRS. VIVIAN has been graciously pleased to invite me to go and have luncheon with her to-day, and to inspect a box of new dresses which she has just received from Paris. So don't you stay too long at Mrs. Toegoode's, Stella, or we shall have Nettie fainting for want of some one to listen to her pretty prattle."

It was Mary who spoke as the sisters were preparing to go their several ways after breakfast.

"I think it's very shabby of you, Mary, to refuse to take me when you know I am longing to go and see that delightful Shoddy-Princess again," cried Nettie, a pout on her lips and a smile in her eyes. "You might as well say you were unaccustomed to going out unaccompanied," she added, the smile mischievously illumining her whole face. "*I* have



to state those ridiculous facts for Mother Grundy's satisfaction, why shouldn't you?"

"Little girls must be left at home now and then," said Mary, who was really sorry for the Baby, to whom solitude was always a punishment. It never occurred to the quiet eldest sister, that it was for Ronald's sake Nettie so much desired to accompany her to Mrs. Vivian.

"And I s'pose you won't let me come with you either, Stella?" her sister whispered presently, as Estella stood, her hand on the latch of the window which looked out into the Gardens.

To open it, she had pulled up the blind and a dazzling glare of sunshine now flooded the room.

Covering her eyes with her hand to exclude the painfully brilliant light, she answered her sister's timid little petition,

"No, darling; forgive me if I don't ask you to come with me this morning; I really cannot do so. We are going to talk quite solemnly, you see, and only about business, so you or any third person would be *de trop* of course. Don't be vexed, you dearest old Baby," Estella continued, seeing the



keen disappointment in her sister's face. "I am *so* anxious to accomplish some thoroughly good work at last, and I shall be so very much happier in every respect if I succeed in this undertaking."

She spoke very gravely, and her tone carried conviction to sympathetic Nettie, who quite understood her "clever" sister now.

"I'll only beg of you, to tell me *all* she says about Gwendolen, dear," she whispered, resting her chin against Estella's shoulder, with a pretty caressing manner which was habitual to her.

"I promise to tell you everything, Nettie, as soon as I return," said Estella gaily; "and I have still a heap of news in reserve for you about last night, and the rival editors, and how pleasant they both were to me, and how hopeful I feel about Gwendolen now, though no one seems to approve of such a simple title—it's only a girl's name after all, you see."

"But such a girl!" cried Nettie, with enthusiasm, and suddenly recalling a previous train of thought, she added anxiously, "Was Ronald Vivian there last



night? He said he should return from Cambridge before the 16th."

"I was too tired and too—too stupid last night, to tell you anything, dear Baby, but I have a number of nice messages for you from several people, and, 'let me whisper it in thine ear, my darling,' Master Ronald desired his *kindest* regards. All the rest you shall hear on my return. Ta, ta! Pull down the blinds again, or Mary will scold, because the sun fades the new carpets. That's eleven o'clock, I'm off."

She made her way out of the window, leaving Nettie to exclude the sun's rays, while she herself rejoiced in their brilliance, as she stepped out into the balmy beauty of the glorious summer morning.

The dew-drops which had glistened on grass and leaves some hours ago, had all been absorbed by the powerful heat already; but the moisture, which had sparkled like diamonds in the sun's rays before, was in the balmy air still, lending it a subtle dewy fragrance, which to Estella seemed



perfectly delicious. She inhaled it gratefully, as it appeared to lend quite a new zest to her capacity for happiness again.

Since she had become acquainted with St. Helier, her former enjoyment in the mere fact of existence had left her; and instead of a psalm of perpetual rejoicing, she had felt woefully tempted to chant a continual "miserere" in secret.

Not a soul was visible in the long oval of the Gardens, and all the windows facing the morning sun were closely curtained.

Estella had never seen the "Recreation-Ground" thus deserted before, but in her present mood, this solitude was delightful.

It seemed to her as if she were in her own garden, as she stooped to inhale the delicate fragrance of a freshly opened moss-rose, which grew in the centre of one of the jealously-guarded flower-beds, which were the pride and joy of most of the Grenfellians.

They somewhat arrogantly declared, indeed, that theirs were the only Gardens in London, in which



choice flowers were allowed to thrive unharmed for the benefit of all the visitors.

It was only when Estella put out an eager hand, longing to pluck that rose, that she suddenly remembered she was not in her own territory, and flushing hotly at the thought that she had very nearly committed what she and all Grenfellians would certainly have considered a theft, she closely hugged her bulky parcel of manuscript and hurried on, keeping very strictly to the gravelled path now.

As she approached the small gate at the far end of the Gardens, however, she paused for a moment, pulling her broad-brimmed hat well over her face, for the dazzling sunlight was almost blinding her.

How cool and inviting the Grove looked, its avenue of trees filling it with shade! Did all the branches meet overhead? Estella wondered, and moved close up to the gate in order to ascertain if the verdant arch made by the meeting branches of the first trees in the rows continued all the way along the Grove.

She was so very much interested in this question that she felt sorely tempted to walk out of the



Gardens and along the Grove, in order to satisfy herself on the subject. Why should she not go, it would not be at all out of her way to go through the Grove, and then round to the front of the Gardens to No. 3?

She wanted to have another look at all those "bijou" residences, and most of all at that *multum in parvo* which Nettie had been so enraptured with on that eventful musical afternoon. . . . "And *he* called me cruel!" Estella pondered, leaning upon the little gate now, but not having passed through it.

She was glad to stand there and think—glad to know she was so near to the little house which his care and skill had made so beautiful. Should she ever have the chance of entering it again, she wondered, and would Hilda be there if she did, and which of them all would be most cruel then? For her part, she was quite prepared to suffer again, if only the delight of St. Helier's presence could be secured to her at the same time.

What would she not be willing to bear for the sake of seeing him now!



The desire within her became so urgent that with the vague hope of seeing him at his study window if she passed up the Grove, she was preparing to let herself out of the Gardens' exit, when she caught sight of St. Helier himself, who had just come out of his garden, closing the gate behind him with a sharp click, and sauntering lazily down the incline towards her.

He wore a straw hat with a broad black ribbon and light summer clothes, and Estella thought he looked more charming than she had ever seen him.

For an instant it occurred to her that it would be less embarrassing for her if she sat down in the shadow of the spreading oak-tree, against which a seat was most invitingly placed. But, then, he might not see her at all—he might pass on unheeding, following the road, along the outside of the Gardens.

Was he on his way to No. 39? . . . As that cruel thought entered her mind, she shivered in spite of the heat, and with this physical expression of her mental anxiety, she resolved to stand still where she was and wait for him; *she* certainly



would not sacrifice this golden opportunity of a talk with him, for the sake of sparing herself a momentary feeling of embarrassment. Ah! here he was, shaking hands with her, and so delighting her with his pleased look of surprise that she forgot herself altogether in her eager response to his gay greeting. "Up with the lark, and fresh as Aurora!" he exclaimed, reluctantly allowing her to withdraw the hand she had laid into his. "Since you are here, may I not be permitted to enter also?" he asked, drawing the gate-key off her little finger, on which she had hung it.

She smiled her assent, and he unlocked the gate, entered the Gardens, and motioned to the bench under the oak-tree.

"Are you in a hurry?" he enquired, after a moment's hesitation, as the vision of her irate parent rose before his mind's eye.

Instead of any spoken reply, she seated herself, and drew the folds of her crisp white skirt close to her, thus leaving the greater portion of the bench unoccupied; then she smiled up at him as much



as to say, "You see I have left plenty of room for you."

He understood and accepted the frank invitation of her bright glance, and leisurely seating himself by her side, he laid his hand upon the bulky parcel, which was now resting on her knees.

"More *notes?*" he enquired, with that dubious smile of his which had been haunting her for so many a long day past now.

"I fancy I see some blue lines; oh, yes! and some writing, too!" he continued, drawing the manuscript gently out of its brown paper husk.

She did not attempt to check or resist him; indeed she was only too thankful to have him close by her side once again, and evidently a little bit interested in her affairs. "Since I've managed to find my way into the shell all alone," he said, "you might be generous, and show me the kernel now."

With trembling fingers she untied the knotted string, and drawing forth the roll of manuscript, handed it to him without further hesitation.



She really felt that she was conferring an immense favour in allowing him to have a look at the cherished work of all her leisure hours during the last ten weeks.

He, for his part, was evidently much impressed by this decided proof of her confidence, and turned over the pages of the manuscript with as much care and reverence as even the heart of an aspiring authoress could possibly desire.

To a bystander, the little scene might have suggested the wistful anxiety with which a fond young mother watches a stranger handling the fragile treasure of which she has but lately become the happy possessor herself.

Indeed, the simile would not be an unsuitable one, for, to Estella, this the first offspring of her brain, the mental baby, which after many hours of anxious thought and assiduous labour she had at last brought into something like form, this brain-child, in fact, was as important, and her feeling for it as anxious as, though perhaps less tender than, that of the real mother above alluded to.



"How industrious you have been, Miss Estella!" was St. Helier's first verbal comment; but his eager and attentive eyes had already said a great deal to her who had watched them so anxiously. "When first we spoke of this novel together," he continued, presently, "I had no idea you were so thoroughly in earnest about it all. I believe at that time you had only commenced to make desultory notes?"

"Yes; but now I have finished the first volume," she cried, with a smile of triumph and elation, which lit up her expressive face, and made it quite beautiful.

"And has any one helped you with the story?" he asked, evidently interested now.

"Only dear Nettie, with her unflagging spirits and her shrewd comments," said Estella, smiling; and added, "I think I have been wonderfully fortunate for a beginner, for Mr. Latimer has kindly promised to assist me in getting my book read by some editor who is a friend of his, and who will certainly give me a fair chance."

"Oh!" said St. Helier, and said nothing more,



but apparently busied himself with reading a sentence here and there in the manuscript.

Her sudden and familiar mention of Mr. Latimer's name in connection with the work, which was evidently her first interest in life, had given him a shock for which he was unable to account.

"Could there be any tie between them?" was the question which filled him with a sudden dismay.

Then he felt inclined to protest savagely against this unwelcome mental inquiry; but the sudden remembrance of her confidential colloquy with Latimer, as she sat on this very bench by his side but a few days ago, by no means reassured St. Helier.

He remembered with a pang, which he would not admit to be jealousy, that Estella was far too much absorbed in talking and listening to "that brute" (hitherto Latimer had been considered a very delightful companion) to take the very slightest notice of him, St. Helier, who had broken an engagement, and walked into the Gardens on that particular afternoon, solely with a view to getting a



glimpse of, perhaps a word with, the charming Estella, who had been haunting him as pertinaciously as he, all unconsciously, had been haunting her. . . .

He did get the "glimpse" he had longed for, but nothing more, as we know; and he had felt very disappointed and very unhappy, and as he walked away, smarting under a keen sense of the injury (?) she had done him, he had racked his brains with innumerable and most perplexing questions, to not a single one of which he was able to give himself anything like a satisfactory reply. Had she only pretended not to see him, to avoid giving him the "cut direct" which that crotchety old father of hers had perhaps insisted upon?

In any case, his afternoon was lost, and even now he smarted at the recollection of the savage feelings which had agitated him then; so thoroughly upset had he been by the scene he had witnessed in the Gardens that he had felt himself compelled to go to Hilda and implore her to sing to him, and in listening to her melodious tones his ruffled spirit had regained its wonted calm. Poor Hilda! what a



glorious voice she had, and what a noble, generous nature! Ah, well! if Estella had really engaged herself to Mr. Latimer—then he, St. Helier, would prove that he also could be generous, for he would strive to do all that lay in his power to bring about the fruition of young Ronald Vivian's hopes of happiness. . . . What a commotion a double wedding from the Gardens would cause to all Grenfellians! . . . Ronald would probably require the services of the kind friend who had so generously helped him to win a prize in the matrimonial lottery, as best man. Should he accept the invitation? He laughed aloud at the ludicrous notion, and poor Estella, who had already been much perplexed by his extraordinary silence asked timidly,

"Do you find it so ridiculous?" She pointed to the open pages of the manuscript as she spoke. He had all this time been closely bending over them, apparently absorbed in their perusal.

He started visibly as she so suddenly addressed him, and laughed again in his delight at finding her there alone by his side, while Latimer, and Hilda



and Ronald, with the church and the altar, faded like dissolving views from his mental vision.

“Forgive me, Miss Estella,” he said deprecatingly; “something I read here reminded me of a joke of my student days. How fortunate for you and your printers that your writing is so legible!” he commented, presently. But he hardly looked at her now, and was speaking in the dry tone which always made her fear that she had in some way displeased him. “I had almost hoped,” she said, hesitating painfully between the words—“I had hoped once that *you* perhaps would kindly have given me a few hints—a little advice—Mr. St. Helier; you offered to do so, do you remember? and you have so much experience, and know all about plots and real men and women of the world, whereas all I could tell was about our former simple country life at Oakhurst, or just some little bits of experiences which have come to me since—I have known you,” were the words on her lips, but she recollected herself just in time, and discreetly substituted “since we have all lived in London.”

“Hilda would make a fine character for a



heroine," suggested St. Helier interrogatively, after another long pause.

"I have tried to describe her as an artist," said Estella, too much interested in her work at the moment, to be disturbed by the petty jealousy such a remark would have provoked in the mind of the conventional young lady.

"Your gentle reproof has so painfully reminded me of my unpardonable shortcomings as regards *our* novel," he resumed presently, "that I scarcely dare venture to ask a favour of you now?" He paused and looked straight into her eyes, as he added pleadingly, "Will you trust me with this until to-morrow?" He rolled up the manuscript as he spoke, and held it towards her, awaiting her decision.

"I should be very grateful to you if you would take the trouble to read it," she said, evidently gratified by his request. "I do not think you will be too severe a critic, for you will surely bear in mind that this is my first attempt, and that I have lived away in the country very quietly all my life."



"I will forget nothing you have told me," he replied.

"And you will tell me your opinion, your real thoughts about it all?" she said, rising, and looking up at him as he stood by her side, with so wistful an appeal in her eyes that he could not meet them quite steadily with his.

She at this moment was thinking wholly of her work. He was thinking only of her.

She started almost guiltily as all the clocks with one accord commenced to strike, and she mechanically counted—twelve.

"I have missed my appointment," she said, but her smile betrayed no regret, "I meant to take my writing to Mrs. Toegoode to-day, who has promised me some practical assistance."

"Will you give me the chance of trying to render you some such help in Mrs. Toegoode's stead?" he enquired. "If you are not satisfied with me to-morrow, you can keep your appointment with Mrs. Toegoode then."

She had already shaken hands with him and



was turning away, when he approached her again.

"In any case *I* shall depend on seeing you here to-morrow at the same time and *alone?*" he said interrogatively, and if she dared to meet his eyes she would find very eloquent entreaty in them now, but she does not dare, for his low tender tones are thrilling her with a subtle ecstasy which is nearly allied to pain. "Will you promise me, Estella?" he repeated anxiously, and clasped her little hand closely again, just as he did last night.

It was no dream, she remembers it all too vividly, as with an effort she tears herself from his detaining grasp.

"*I dare* not," she says, and scuds away over the grass, her white skirt flashing like a sunlit sail.

St. Helier stood motionless watching her, until she had disappeared beyond a bed of shrubs and flowering lilac-trees.

"She dare not?" he muttered half aloud in vexed interrogation. "Dare not what?—not promise—or not come?" A sudden smile lit up his per-



plexed face, as his eye fell on the roll of manuscript he held in his hand.

"She will come for this, if not for me," he thought, with returning satisfaction, and sauntered leisurely away homewards.

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## CHAPTER VII.

## A SUCCESSFUL (?) AUTHORESS.

ALTHOUGH Estella hurried away from St. Helier in breathless haste when she heard the clock strike twelve, and reproached herself for not having kept the appointment made for her by Mrs. Toegoode, yet it was not in the direction of that lady's house that she bent her steps.

How could she possibly concentrate her widely-scattered ideas, or attempt to talk "business," while all her thoughts were so completely engrossed by that late momentous interview? She also feared that her crimsoned cheeks and throbbing pulses must surely betray her excitement to the most callous observer. No, she could not go through formalities of any kind just yet, she must contrive to restore her mental equilibrium before she came in contact with any outsiders. To arrive at her normal



condition again she felt she must be quite alone for awhile, and she longed to shut herself away from the inquisitive world, in her own little sky-parlour.

The greatest difficulty in her way would be to enter the house unperceived by her sisters.

Mary was generally too much occupied by her household affairs to trouble herself at all about those of her sisters, or any one else. But Nettie, irrepressible Nettie, seldom settled to any tranquil occupation, and had a knack of "pervading" the hall, the staircase, and the passages, which ubiquitous inclination Estella to-day, for the first time, thought of as troublesome.

It so happened, however, that on this particular morning Mary had provided the "Baby" with an engrossing occupation. So while she was wearily bending over an arduous task undertaken to oblige her eldest sister, Estella, having crept in through the kitchen entrance, was stealthily making her way upstairs.

Had Nettie had the slightest suspicion of her



sister's return, she would have hastened to meet her instantly, as she was now burning with curiosity to hear the details of this morning's interview with Mrs. Toegoode, as well as a full, true, and particular account of the adventures of the previous evening, about which the poor child, in spite of her intense anxiety, had been left completely in the dark.

As it was, Chapman, the discreet parlour-maid, was the only person in No. 40 who was aware of Miss Estella's sudden and secret entrance. And Chapman being of a silently observant disposition, had long since come to the conclusion that Miss Estella was "particular" in many of her ways. She was not steady and regular like Miss Mary, nor yet romping and flighty like Miss Nettie, but she was decidedly more peculiar than either of those young ladies. They certainly enjoyed their visiting and shopping expeditions, and were always pleased to receive their friends at home too. But Miss Estella mostly refused to go to Regent Street with her sisters, persistently shut herself up in her "den," and even if the drawing-room was full of company,



never came down unless her pa, or Miss Mary, insisted on her doing so. And when "all the folks was out at the games in the Gardens," Miss Estella would either be sitting apart with her book and her pencil or she would be practising her music in the empty drawing-room.

Of all these peculiar ways Chapman, in her silent fashion, had duly taken note.

So when Estella, walking on tiptoe, glanced into the pantry where Chapman was cleaning plate, and whispered, "Please don't tell Miss Nettie that I have come in, because I am very busy and do not wish to be disturbed this morning," the parlour-maid concluded that there was some more of that everlasting writing to be done up in the Den, and held her peace accordingly.

To bathe her flushed face, and brush over the waving masses of her rebellious hair, was the work of a very few minutes to Estella, and by the time she had restored the wonted order to her external appearance her inward composure had also returned to her.



She was at this moment absorbed and perplexed by two questions, which appeared of vital importance to her.

The one nearest her heart was, *how* to meet St. Helier again the next morning without raising any suspicion in the minds of her sisters.

She had already determined not to fail at the trysting-place.

Her wonted courage had returned to her, and she now felt there was nothing she would *not* dare for the sake of another such interview as that brought about by chance this morning.

The help she had been yearning for, the practical advice which would give a back-bone to her work, and endow it with vigour and vitality, would all be forthcoming if once *he* took this novel of hers in hand. . . .

St. Helier had already become as a god to her girlish inexperience.

What he chose to do must be good, what he thought or said must be right.

Such was Estella's conviction, and she clung to



it as all fanatics do to the tenets which best accord with their inclinations. She had that implicit faith in St. Helier which is perhaps the most beautiful, as it certainly is the most touching, characteristic of the ardent love of a true woman. And since he had bidden her come to him in the morning, she would obey him—of course.

The second question which agitated Estella at this moment, as having an immediate bearing on that first difficulty, was how to manage Mrs. Toe-goode.

The girl felt instinctively that if she chanced to offend Adela-ida at this juncture, she should at once lose all control over those circumstances, the reins of which she at this moment most earnestly desired to hold in her own eager young hand.

She knew that many and serious difficulties were crowding in upon her on every side, and being by nature brave as well as impetuous, she determined at once to confront the chief of those difficulties in person.

Acting upon this heroic resolution, she found



herself a few minutes after she had made it, in Mrs. Toegoode's study (?).

Such was the appellation bestowed upon the most disorderly and unstudylike apartment Estella had ever beheld.

Whip-racks and sporting sketches covered the walls, relieved by meerschaum pipes in various stages of colouring, *i.e.* of discoloration. These pipes had racks of their own, as had spurs, flasks, and other hunting paraphernalia. A breakfast service stood on one small table, and piles of MS. paper lay on another. Quills, more or less cut away, were scattered over both the tables and the floor; an ink-stand lay upon the carpet, where its contents were making a darkly stagnant pool.

Estella noticed the fringe of a light shawl and the long pink ribbons of a bonnet hanging over the side of a chair, in alarming proximity to the ink-pool, upon the dismal surface of which a white glove rested.

Adela-ida herself, stretched at her ease upon a low lounging-chair, looked a fit "monarch of all she



surveyed." A pink flannel peignoir, decidedly the worse for wear, was wrapped about her slim figure, and her auburn locks were hanging over her shoulders in unkempt profusion.

"You will excuse finding me in such a frightful muddle, my dear, I know," she said, extending a hand to her visitor, which, like her gown, would have been improved by soap and water. "Only my very intimate friends are admitted into my study, you see, and they are always pleased to take me as they find me. I hope you'll do the same."

Estella smiled, and thanked her hostess for the privilege accorded her. And as she seated herself she made a hasty mental sketch of the peculiar arrangement, or disarrangement, of this abode of genius.

"Fact is, I've only just had my breakfast," the authoress said, pointing to the china on the farther table. "Thank your stars you haven't an idle husband to look after, my dear. Here am I, obliged to spend all my time supplying the greedy public with yards and yards of fiction, which does use up



one's brain-power as well as one's pens and paper, although few people give one any credit for the lavish expenditure of thought. Well, that's my trade, and I don't mean to grumble at it, but it is hard to be responsible for an unnecessarily large house, its attendant expenses, and one's husband too. If Lionel misses his train this morning, I shall be blamed for his unpunctuality. If his trunk miscarries, the fault will be laid at my door. I'm quite positive already, that both train and trunk will be lost, for he started an hour after the first had left the station, and I've just found his keys and his luggage-label *here*."

As she spoke Mrs. Toegoode snatched at the light shawl, the fringe of which, on the other side, sank deep into the ink-pool.

The articles she had mentioned were lying among sundry others on the chair.

Estella rushed forward, and managed to rescue the descending bonnet strings. Looking into the authoress's wan and wearied face, she said, "I am afraid you are a good deal worried, poor Mrs. Toe-



goode, and I will certainly not inflict either my manuscript or my enquiries upon you this morning."

There was more truth in this earnest assertion of Estella's than might appear, to those who are aware that her manuscript was no longer in her own keeping.

Even as she spoke, the girl assured herself that nothing should have induced her to torment poor Mrs. Toegoode with questions on her own account, while that lady was so evidently preoccupied by personal perplexities.

"Thanks for your kind consideration," said the authoress, with a profound sigh. "I will confess that I'm too much bothered to-day to think of any one else's worries. I only hope for your sake, my poor child, that you may never find out for yourself what it is to have one's last novel, the work of six weary months, hang fire."

"But that can only be temporary," cried Estella reassuringly, "your books are all so popular."

"So I used to think," said Adela-ida deprecatingly, "and so I still assure my acquaintances and



my publisher, but to myself I am forced to tell a different story; and to you, who are good and generous, I will not lie, as I'm forced, for the sake of my literary reputation, to lie to the whole set of gossiping outsiders.

"The publisher and I both expected 'Was Hers the Blame?'" to go off readily. But it doesn't. He declares it is too peppery, and I am sure it's not half spiced enough for the vicious tastes of the day. Careful, thoughtful writing is of no account now; the cry is always for innuendoes and sensation. Such books as 'Green Figs' go through dozens of editions, whereas 'Sterling Merritt' cumpers the warehouse shelves. I took more real care, and gave far more thought to my last book than to three of my ordinary novels. But what's the use of talking? the unsatisfactory results are the hard facts by which to judge of one's work. For me the specially hard fact is, that I was desperately in want of cash when I signed my agreement. So I sacrificed the future for the sake of a small sum of ready money. This will end disastrously for me, unless the fickle public make a sudden rush upon my book."



"I have not read it," remarked Estella deprecatingly, "the critics—"

"Exactly," cried Mrs. Toegoode eagerly, "the critics have so lashed and slashed me and my work, that I began to have some faith in its ultimate success."

"Because it was cut up?" asked Estella surprised.

"Yes," answered the authoress, with a dubious smile. "Universal condemnation by the press was the making of 'Can it be?' as it was also of that disgusting book, 'Green Figs.' But, alas! the public veers like a weathercock, and now the contempt of the press, instead of benefiting, threatens to annihilate my last 'blameless' production altogether.

"If I should forfeit the greater part of my pay, which, according to my necessitous pre-arrangement, was to depend on the number of copies sold, we shall be ruined, literally ruined. Then we must 'cut and run,' or let this house furnished, and retrench abroad for a term, and that just as I have at last managed to feel at home in a congenial set. Isn't it a dreadful life?"



As the unfortunate authoress reached this climax in the narration of her perplexities, she suddenly covered her face with her hands and sobbed aloud.

Estella stood silent, large-eyed, and quite at a loss how to comfort or console the unhappy woman, whom but a few weeks ago she had regarded as the most enviable of her kind.

"There!" cried Mrs. Toegoode, suddenly rising from her lounging chair and stamping her griefs down with a very determined foot. "There! I've made a fool of myself, my dear, and should be ashamed of my weakness too, if it weren't such a good practical lesson for you."

Estella's wonder shone in her questioning eyes.

"You may well look astonished," cried Mrs. Toegoode, "but I mean what I say. You're pretty and *piquante*, and clever and bright. You are a 'girl of promise,' you perhaps may have a brilliant career before you, as I had once—ages ago.

"Yes, I too was pretty and clever and all the rest of it, though you would scarcely believe it to look at me now. There was a time when I also felt that I had a grand career before me, and I entered



upon it full of courage and a delightful ambition. My first book was a thrilling, a real success. I was quite a young girl, too, with very little experience; but I had talent, I loved my work, and people liked it because it was fresh and original. How happy I was about it all! But I had an ambitious father, a half-pay officer, and he cared a deal more for the aristocracy of birth than of intellect. So I was married to the Honble. Lionel Toegoode, and—”

A long and significant pause followed these explanations.

Then, moved by a sudden impulse, she seized Estella's hands in hers, and added impressively, “writing, and supporting an idle fine gentleman, don't go well together. If you want to write successfully, Estella, don't marry, or if you fall in love, as foolish girls will, profit by my bitter experience, and take care the man of your choice can at least keep himself; better still, both of you.”

The troubled lines seemed to fade out of Adela's prematurely wrinkled face, as she looked at the girl standing before her with sympathy and interest so plainly written on her expressive face.



"I like you, Estella," the authoress presently resumed, with the pleasantest look in her eyes which the girl had ever seen there, "and though, for many and many a long year past, I have never been able to afford myself the luxury of a disinterested friendship, that really is the feeling I have for you. I should enjoy being of service to you, and that I can be, for no one is better fitted to put you up to the tricks of the trade.

"Our trade has its very decided tricks, you must know, and we retailers must be pretty sharp, to keep pace with the wholesale dealers, the mighty Publishers."

"May I come round to-morrow about this time?" asked Estella flushing guiltily, as the, to her, all-important question passed her trembling lips.

"By all means, child," answered Adela-ida cordially, "you needn't bring your manuscript just yet. We'll just sit and chat and you can tell me the story. Then, by-and-by I'll glance over a few pages, it won't take me long to know all about it."

"Good-bye, and thank you so very much," cried Estella with wonderful emphasis, and was about to



leave the room, when Mrs. Toegoode detained her.

“Your people don’t like me, my dear, they don’t quite approve of me. Oh! pray don’t protest, it’s right and natural for them to keep you out of the clutches of supposititious adventuresses. I don’t blame either your father or Miss Mary, but I would like you to know, that I’m not quite the sort of woman they think me. I’m very reckless, very slatternly, always in debt, always in trouble, but I’m not bad at heart, and I would like *you* to know the best of me.

“Mine is a case of more sinned against than sinning, perhaps.

“Any way, if you have to mention the fact of your visits to me, at home, let it be understood that *I am assisting you with your writing, because I believe you will make money at it.* That will smooth your path at once. It’s strange how the best (and sometimes the rich people are good too), and the wealthiest, will ignore quite a multitude of little sins for the sake of a possible pecuniary advantage to be gained from intercourse with the supposed sinner.



"I think I quite understand, and I certainly am very grateful to you," said Estella, and remembering with a sudden throb of delight how easy Mrs. Toe-goode's words had made her plans for the morrow. "Good-bye, again," she added. "I don't know how to thank you sufficiently."

Adela-ida put her hands on the girl's shoulders, and kissed her lovingly on either cheek.

"Come to me as often as you can, child, and then the gratitude must all be on my side. *Au revoir.*" And thus they parted.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

## JEALOUSY.

Who or what could possibly have induced Mrs. Toegoode to propose that their future intercourse should be of a quasi-clandestine nature?

That was Estella's first surprised thought as she made her way into the Gardens.

Was there really such a thing as luck, and was that same luck smiling upon and favouring all her enterprises at this juncture?

Nothing could have happened more opportunely for her present designs than the pretext Mrs. Toegoode has just given her for leaving home frequently and alone.

Perhaps it was very wrong of her to rejoice in the chance which made the deception of her father and sisters so easy to her. But then St. Helier had asked her to come, and surely he would never desire her to do anything that was wrong?



Her father had certainly never forbidden her to meet St. Helier. That he might not approve of a pre-arranged interview she thought possible, nay, probable.

But then the appointment for the morrow was their first, and it might be—their last. . . .

The more reason for her to avail herself of the chance so unexpectedly offered to her.

But the mere passing thought of a possible final interview with the man she loved made Estella shudder with a sudden terror.

Yes, she loved St. Helier. Each passing hour convinced her of that all-engrossing fact.

Was she loved in turn? That was the awful, the unanswerable question.

Only last night she had felt sure, painfully, cruelly sure, that Hilda was the sole mistress of the affections of the man who revelled in her glorious voice.

This very morning, when Estella saw him strolling down the incline from the Grove, he was surely making his way along the road to number 39 . . . .



This recollection brought the hot blood back into her face, and gave her that inexplicable pain which caused her to hold her breath, and press her hand over her heart.

How earnestly those two were talking together last night; how absorbed they were in one another's whispered confidences. . . .

Brooding thus, Estella sank upon one of the garden seats.

But as the vision of those two rapt in engrossing converse rose before her mind's eye, she started up in a fever of jealous impatience.

What did it all mean? This suspense was unendurable. She must, she would know the truth.

She would go to Hilda now, at once, and, if necessary, demand an explanation.

*Gedacht, gethan.*

Estella was certainly in a very determined mood this morning, for no sooner had this second difficulty formidably presented itself to her impetuous spirit than she hastened to No. 39, and a few minutes later was received by the Signorina in Mrs. Braun's elaborately neat drawing-room.



Estella had been a little surprised to meet Lord Goselyngge in the entrance-hall.

His Lordship was departing as she came into the house.

Still, she was far too much preoccupied by her jealous fears, and by her eager determination to know the worst, and at once, to bestow more than a passing glance and thought upon the musical lord.

She did not stay to wonder why he was there, and had forgotten him altogether as she entered the drawing-room.

She had determined to meet Hilda coldly; to be perfectly calm, perfectly self-contained herself, while—

But how was that course of conduct possible when Hilda, perceiving her friend on the threshold, ran towards her and, clasping her in a fervent embrace, kissed her rapturously as she cried, "*Carissima mia!* ah! but you cannot possibly guess what good, what most excellent news I have."

Then Estella looked keenly into Hilda's face, and saw that it was radiant.

"Sit here by my side, so, *cara mia*," said the



Signorina, "and, I pray you, do not look so grave, while I tell to you all my best news. Ah! you will smile now, for I will tell you the best thing first of all. *I am engaged!* What do you say to that?"

Estella said nothing.

Not a word could she utter. But she felt all the new joy suddenly ebbing out of her heart, just as she felt all the warm colour forsaking her face.

"Stella! you turn pale!" cried Hilda, somewhat taken aback by this sign of extraordinary emotion. "Is it that you fear I shall fail, or is it your true English horror of the stage, which, alas! Theodosia has taught me to understand so well already?"

"The stage!" stammered Estella, with a sudden quickening of her pulses, as she realised that there were other engagements possible to Hilda besides that matrimonial one, on which all the love-sick girl's anxious thoughts had been concentrated of late.

"Yes, of course, the stage, the opera; what else could make me so joyful?" cried Hilda eagerly. "Lord Goselyngge has just been here. He had already called upon Signor Scuro and obtained my



address, and he has made me the most delightful proposals.

"I am to make my *début* as a sort of experiment next month for what is called the extra season.

"That will try me, and either give or take my confidence and his.

"The business settlements his lordship never 'discusses personally,'" he says. "They are to be left to Mr. Giacomo Arrowsmith and my agent. My agent! ha! ha! where is that amiable factotum to be found, I wonder? To whom shall I turn for help now?

"I have already felt, last night, that I have perhaps asked too much of Mr. St. Helier."

Hilda had laughed and joked when she alluded to the imaginary agent, but her look and tone had both changed as she slowly spoke those last words, which sounded regretful.

Estella, a little perplexed, was silent, waiting to hear more before she ventured on giving any opinion.

"This morning, which should be the most joyful



to me," resumed Hilda, "is the very first on which I have realised that it is—terrible—to be all alone in this great busy London city."

"But you are not alone; you have good friends, indeed," said Estella earnestly, and she took both the Signorina's hands as she spoke.

She was quite ready, now that she saw Hilda in trouble, to overcome her personal feelings, since her friend's happiness was evidently at stake. "I am quite sure Mr. St. Helier will be glad to help you if you need either advice or assistance," she said reassuringly, and as she spoke she felt that help or counsel from him must surely overcome all difficulties, at once and for ever.

"Yes, it is true he would try to give me a friend's helping hand if I could ask him, but that I cannot," said Hilda slowly, and, by way of explanation, added, "He was so very troubled last night by my complaint of the uncomfot of this home, that I made up a fix determine not any more to what you call worry him about my private affairs. Indeed, I have always been a worry to him since I came.



"Theodosia has told me so, and even good Madame Braun cannot say no to it.

"But that shall be ended.

"I will find a new apartment, and at once, and all by myself alone. He shall be asked no unpleasant question for me this time. If I can be no happiness to him, I will no more exist as far as he is concerned. I will certainly, under no circumstance, consent to feel myself a burden to so good a friend."

Something very like a sob followed these lugubrious words of Hilda's, but she managed to laugh again as she said,

"I do deserve to have a letter now to tell me I am not wanted at the Diamond Opera House at all. That would be the right punishment for my ungratefulness in being melancholy just when all goes so well for me."

"I have scarcely had time to congratulate you on your success and your most advantageous engagement," said Estella, who felt as if she would like to hug Hilda on the strength of her good news. "I am sure you know, however, that I am most delighted



to hear that Lord Goselyngge has displayed such very good sense. Mr. Raynewater told me the young lord was by no means a fool—‘not such a fool as he looks!’ were *his* words.”

“Ah! I do not think he looks stupid,” remonstrated Hilda. “His blonde hair and his *dolce* expression, are perhaps a little feminine, but there is what you call a hiding power—”

“Latent,” suggested Estella.

“Yes, latent power in his mouth and chin, and in his straight eyes too, when he takes the trouble really to look with them.”

“His direct glance has certainly been turned on you with considerable effect, Miss Hilda,” cried Estella laughing, and feeling very light-hearted as she lifted her finger in would-be reproof at the Signorina.

“You may laugh at me, Stella,” said Hilda; “it is good to see you gay. You also have so often been *triste* lately; why for I cannot in the least imagine, you who seem to have everything to make you so very happy. You will come to my *début*,



will you not?" she added, suddenly reverting to the matter nearest her heart.

"Of course I shall desire to do so above all things," said Estella promptly, and remembering a former remark of the Signorina's, she asked her if she had really determined to leave Mrs. Braun's.

Then Hilda unreservedly poured out her grievances, and confided to her sympathetic friend the systematic persecution to which jealous Theodosia had subjected her throughout her residence at No. 39, but more especially since Mr. Latimer had not procured the much-coveted ticket for the Dowager's At-Home.

"She will be more jealous and angry than ever now," whispered Hilda, rising and going to the door, "for I hear Mr. Latimer's voice in the hall, and I mean to ask him to help me in this matter of the engagement.

"He is a man of the world, has much experience, tact, and *savoir faire*, and he will undertake this as a business. He once offered me to arrange any such transaction for me, and to save



me from the feeling of obligation he volunteered to accept a—”

“Fee?” suggested Estella laughing.

“Yes,” replied Hilda gravely, “and that is the only way in which I can allow a gentleman to act for me now.

“Once I thought otherwise, but Theodosia, with all her unkindness, has taught me some very practical lessons, and she has also, this very morning since breakfast, told me of a letter Mr. St. Helier wrote to Madame Braun, which plainly shows that he wishes for no more responsibility for me, and indeed has had too much trouble already.”

“Cruel, jealous old Dosie!” cried Estella, and was about to give her own version of that letter, when Hilda requested Mr. Latimer to enter, “as we have a matter of private business to arrange.”

So said the Signorina, taking care to raise her voice, so that Miss Braun, who was hovering about the passage as usual at the hour at which Mr. Latimer was expected, could not fail to hear this mysterious invitation.

Theodosia, furious at this new breach of de-



corum on the Signorina's part, and unaware of Estella's presence in the drawing-room, rushed down to the kitchen, and insisted upon her mother instantly mounting guard over that "flirting foreigner."

"Why not you go in the room yourself, mine Dosie?" cried Mrs. Braun, very loth to be disturbed in the midst of some absorbing culinary experiments.

By way of practical protest, she held up her hands, which were thickly covered with a coating of flour and butter.

But Theodosia, whose admiration for Latimer was strangely mixed with terror of his possible displeasure, did not dare to enter the room, the door of which had been closed, perhaps inadvertently, but none the less effectually, almost in her face.

And so it happened that Mrs. Braun, finding Estella above, entreated her to stay to luncheon, and volunteered to send round for Nettie also, since Miss Norman had gone to Mrs. Vivian's, by request, as Estella affirmed.

Mrs. Braun's hospitality was particularly welcome at this moment. Hilda clung to Estella as a



certain protection against Theodosia's spiteful remarks; Latimer, who had just agreed to settle the Signorina's engagement most satisfactorily for her, was very pleased to think that the dulness of the luncheon table would be so agreeably relieved by the presence of the bright Norman girls, and Estella herself felt that her new luck was evidently in the ascendant still, as any private interview with her sisters was now again delayed for some time to come.

Nettie, who had been chafing in her loneliness, and felt ill-used and cruelly neglected, came tripping round in eager haste, only too delighted to escape from the task Mary had set her, and from the "killing" loneliness of her deserted home.

So it happened that the luncheon party assembled at No. 39 was a cheerful one.

Even Theodosia, reassured by the presence of Estella, as to the nature of that mysterious interview between Hilda and Mr. Latimer, endeavoured to make herself agreeable to her mother's guests, and talked glibly to both the Norman girls, especially to Nettie, who sat by her side. Every possible sub-



ject of mutual interest was discussed between them, with one exception.

Theodosia persistently avoided the most distant allusion to the Dowager's party. The spinster had resolved that, as far as she was concerned, that "very mixed gathering" should be utterly ignored for all time to come.

"I would not have gone for worlds, my dear," she had just been saying to a neighbour, who also had not been invited, and was consequently quite of her opinion.

"Just fancy the sort of people one would have had to meet, perhaps to speak to!" Miss Braun had added indignantly. "I hear that the rooms were literally crowded with professional singers, authors and authoresses, theatrical managers, artists, newspaper printers, and people of that sort, you know."

"Horrible!" the neighbour had replied, who was the wife of a Piccadilly grocer, and boasted of an income which enabled her to have a staff of liveried servants, and a carriage and pair at her disposal.

Mr. Latimer divided his attentions most impartially among the ladies present; offering to assist



Mrs. Braun in her arduous task of carving, joking Nettie about a much discussed innovation which he proposed introducing into their tennis laws, and saying just a word or two in a lower tone, sometimes to Hilda, sometimes to Estella, *à propos* of "business matters."

These "asides" were listened to with wrapt attention by Theodosia, who sat on the opposite side of the table, and as their tone conveyed a sense of interest and intimacy, it galled her to hear them.

But this rage of hers was at least smothered for the time being, and so the social meal passed over pleasantly enough.

"I am quite determined to seek a new home, and at once, Estella," Hilda whispered, as the girls made their way into the drawing-room.

"And without consulting Mr. St. Helier?" Estella asked anxiously.

"Certainly; for the future I must act alone on my own responsibility. If you knew all Theodosia has said to me on the subject of compromising others as well as myself by my ridicule dependence



on a man in Mr. St. Helier's position, you would feel as I do now, that I must act for myself alone in future."

"Of course I cannot give you any advice," said Estella uneasily. "It is a matter in which I am sure you can only be guided by your own feelings. But our Mary, who has practical sense enough to keep us all in order at home, would be sure to advise you well under any circumstances. Come round by-and-by and ask her, will you?"

"I must first think a little more of it all," said Hilda, and so they parted.

Miss Braun had suffered cruelly, and still smarted, under her keen disappointment at not receiving Mr. Latimer's card for the At-Home, and was tormented by envy of Hilda, who did go, and whose elaborate Parisian *toilette* must have made her particularly attractive. Judging of others by her personal experience, Theodosia naturally ascribed any attraction as due to the costume, rather than its wearer.

With this double grievance aggravating her, the baffled spinster had attacked poor Hilda as the



most fitting recipient for the wrath smouldering in her jealous bosom.

In language as cruel as it was startling, Miss Braun had revealed to the Signorina the trying complications inseparable from her lonely condition.

St. Helier's letter to Mrs. Braun was quoted and perverted *ad libitum*. A lasting quarrel between Messrs. Norman and St. Helier was detailed, and its origin stated to be the intimacy of the latter with an unchaperoned foreigner.

"You surely must have remarked the unwillingness of the Normans to associate with you, until your position was guaranteed by the fact of your residence in *my* home?"

Thus delicately (?) Miss Braun diagnosed the unfortunate Signorina's position for her. Hilda, as has previously been stated, was thoroughly unsophisticated. She had little experience of the world and its ways, but she was very observant and painfully sensitive.

Theodosia had very carefully deliberated on the



mode of attack most likely to hurt Hilda's feelings, and to wound her maidenly pride.

This was signally effected by overwhelming the stranger with the painful consciousness of the very equivocal nature of her position as regarded St. Helier, and the consequent wrong she and he had done to those whom both of them no doubt esteemed.

Hilda *had* felt that reluctance on the part of the Normans, to which Miss Braun now alluded, and only last night the girl had realised that St. Helier was unable, to-day she would have thought him *unwilling*, to assist her in her proposed change of residence.

Miss Braun had commenced her remonstrant exhortation, which she called friendly advice, just after Mr. Latimer had torn up the Dowager's card on the previous day, and she resumed it the next morning with additional asperity.

It was due to the announcement of Lord Goselyngge that poor Hilda escaped the addenda, for which Theodosia, warming amiably to her subject, had evidently prepared herself.



So it happened that, while St. Helier was striving to concentrate his attention on certain briefs just handed to him in Westminster Hall, and found his thoughts straying in a most provoking manner to his chance encounter with the interesting authoress, and back again to the enigma hinted at in old Santarelli's letter, Hilda (the enigma) had resolved to act quite independently of the guide her father had chosen for her, and Estella was equally determined to lose no chance of meeting the man from whom her father had been most anxious to separate her.

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CHAPTER IX.

"ENGAGED."

AFTER the luncheon at Mrs. Braun's, Theodosia and Nettie resolved to "cool" themselves by practising certain elaborate tennis manoeuvres in the Gardens.

Hilda and Estella sauntered out also, but with no more ambitious intention than to rest quietly in the shadiest spot they could find.

"You here, Mrs. Toegoode?" cried Estella, perceiving the authoress comfortably extended on her own lounging-chair.

"I was literally suffocated indoors, so I brought my writing out with me, and am just scribbling a few chapters in pencil which I must copy this evening, as the printers have sent up for the end of my story twice already to-day. It's my contribution to one of the 'penny dreadfuls,' and though



it is not the height of my ambition to work for that kind of paper, beggars can't be choosers, you know."

Thus, with a weary sigh, spoke Adela-ida, and threw her pencil and MS. book on the grass by her side.

"Signorina, you look pale," she added, glancing up into Hilda's face; "was the heat or the universal adulation too much for you last night?"

Hilda smiled dubiously, and gently shook her head. Estella, who was standing beside her, laid her hand affectionately on her friend's arm, and replying to Mrs. Toegoode's enquiry, said,

"Hilda is worried, she is not very happy at No. 39, and wants to find another home without delay.

"You have been in this neighbourhood a long time, Mrs. Toegoode, cannot you give us a suitable introduction to a pleasant family who take boarders?"

Adela-ida sat in unresponsive silence for a time, but the changing expression of her face showed that she was considering.



At last she said, "I do know just the home, a real home this, which would suit your friend, Miss Estella."

"Indeed?" and is it not too, not very, far from these Gardens?" asked Hilda, anxiously.

"It is in Grenfell Street, quite close by," said Mrs. Toegoode.

Estella pointed out the commencement of the street to Hilda. It lay in the opposite direction to the Grove.

"An aunt of mine lives there, a Miss Trevor, avowedly an old maid, and not in the least ashamed of her grey locks and her spinsterhood," said Adela-ida.

"She is a lady, and would be a very suitable chaperon for the Signorina should she be required in that capacity. I will go over to-night and prepare her, and if the Signorina will call at No. 25 to-morrow, I will make an appointment for her."

"Let it be in the morning, if you please," said Hilda.

"Say two in the afternoon, dear, if that is not inconvenient to you," interrupted Estella, with a



blush that was quite uncalled for, "either Mary or I would like to accompany you, and we are both engaged in the morning."

"You are too good," answered Hilda gratefully. "I will be ready at two o'clock."

While the momentous question of Hilda's future home was thus being discussed at one end of the Gardens, Nettie, more than "cooled" by her violent exertions at the tennis-nets, sauntered away towards a seat at the farther end of the Gardens, which Mrs. Vivian had just quitted, making her way indoors closely followed by the gallant Latimer.

Both Theodosia and Nettie had watched those two as they entered the gate of No. 20, and the latter said with her most knowing and most aggravating air,

"They make a handsome couple, don't they? Her raven tresses and his white locks form just the sort of complimentary contrast which in matrimony is as desirable as in colours; don't you think so, Miss Braun?"

"You cannot imagine that that bold American woman with a grown-up son really has any designs



on Mr. Latimer?" asked Theodosia, changing colour unbecomingly, and speaking with exceeding bitterness.

"I should certainly think dear little Latimer quite able to frustrate her knavish tricks," laughed Nettie, and added,

"There is the grown-up son; I'll go and enquire into the machinations of his bold ma, shall I?"

Before Miss Braun, choking with indignation, had time to reply, Nettie was sauntering towards the vacated seat, on which she settled herself just as Ronald reached it.

"What an age it is since we have met, Mr. Vivian," said the Baby, showing by her happy smile the pleasure this long-delayed encounter gave her.

"Won't you sit down and talk to me a little bit?" she added wistfully, as she saw him standing uncomfortably beside her, his eyes glancing eagerly in the direction of the group of ladies of which Hilda was the centre.

By way of reply to Nettie's pretty invitation, he seated himself and said,



“How was it you were not at the great party last night, Miss Nettie?”

“Are you quite sure I was not there?” she queried teasingly.

“Quite positive,” he replied gravely. “I looked for you far too anxiously to have missed you had you been there, and at last in my despair I enquired about you, and your sister told me you had not come.”

“I think it is as well I stayed away,” cried Nettie, “to judge by the effect of the huge dissipation on others. You look like a photograph of pale Melancholy. Estella told me she had been miserable, or—bored” (Nettie quickly corrected herself, fearing her confidences were indiscreet), “yes, *bored*; and Hilda—”

“The Signorina is not pale or miserable or bored, I trust?” cried Ronald, warming into sudden animation.

“Well, she is not half as happy as she ought to be, now that she is engaged.”

Estella had already found time to tell Nettie some of the occurrences of the morning, and had



not omitted to mention the shock that word *engaged* had given her.

And now Nettie, piqued by the too evident interest Ronald showed in the Signorina, determined to punish him by a small fright.

But when she perceived the utter *bouleversement* which her news brought about, she remembered his threatened fainting-fit at Mr. St. Helier's tea-party, and hastened to explain.

"Lord Goselyngge has engaged Hilda for the extra season at the Diamond Opera House, and she is to make her *débüt* next month."

"Her *débüt* next month?" echoed Ronald dubiously, and added below his breath, "Then at last I shall know my fate."

He was still awfully pale, and poor Nettie was ready to cry, she felt so hurt and mortified.

If this was the style in which he meant to sit by her side and talk pleasantly to her, she would rather he went straight away to the other end of the Gardens at once, and spoke out to the only person for whom he had eyes and thoughts,



Nettie's inward chafing suddenly found vent in impatient speech.

"You are in love with Hilda, Mr. Vivian, desperately in love. You see I know all about it, so pray don't attempt to deny the fact. It would be really nice and friendly of you now, if you would confide in me.

"Hilda and I have had many a long talk together about Rome, and you and your mother, and all that sort of thing."

Perhaps it was the sight of Jonathan standing miserably alone at some little distance from her, which caused Nettie to conclude her interrogatory speech with his favourite phrase.

Ronald had listened to his pretty baby-faced companion with intense interest, and now said quietly and without any hesitation,

"What you say is quite true, Miss Nettie, and I am proud to own the fact of my love for Hilda, although it has only brought pain and sorrow to her and to me, hitherto."

Nettie listened in miserable silence.

She felt as if she must cry presently, though she



did not in the least know why, only she wished she had not taken Ronald's love for Hilda quite for granted, and she was firmly resolved not to let a single tear fall until she had hurried away in-doors, which she was now longing to do at once.

"You say that Hilda has spoken to you of Rome and of me?" Ronald began anxiously. "Did she tell you *all!*"

"Oh! no," cried Nettie, with a laugh in which only her sisters could have recognised the suppressed sob. "Oh! dear, no; Hilda has never honoured me with any *confidences*; she is Estella's particular friend, you know, not mine;" and she is the worst enemy to both of us, thought Nettie bitterly, but she suppressed this mental protest, and continued quietly, "Our talk about you, Mr. Vivian, has only been in the course of general conversation, when the Signorina has described the balls and receptions and *fêtes* in Rome.

"You seem to have gone wherever she went, and she told us she was asked everywhere on account of her singing. Happy Hilda!"

Nettie felt that that half envious exclamation



warranted a sigh, and so ventured to relieve her poor little over-burdened heart with a profound "Heigh-ho!"

"Heigh-ho!" echoed Ronald quite as earnestly; and perhaps feeling that these expressive exclamations had made mutual confidences easy and natural, he plunged into a most minute account of his love, his sufferings, his hopes and doubts and fears; told Nettie how, after decided opposition, Mrs. Vivian had finally herself consented to plead his cause with Hilda, and how he expected to know his fate as soon as the Signorina had made her *début*; "and that will be very soon now?" he added interrogatively, and Nettie's tender little heart was very much touched by the keen anxiety in his beautiful young face.

Yes, she did think him beautiful, and she wished he was her brother, so that she might fling her arms around his neck and kiss and pet and console him.

Then she would go to Hilda and remonstrate with her, and talk to and reason with her, and plead Ronald's cause so effectively that Hilda would have



to yield, and then Ronald would smile and be happy again as she, Nettie, loved to see him.

So absorbed were these two young people by their earnest thoughts and confidences, that neither of them had taken any notice of poor Jonathan, who had approached within speaking distance now, but was far too much dismayed by the sight of Nettie's intense preoccupation, to venture to interrupt her.

He had been standing patiently awaiting a welcoming word from her, and had shifted the weight of his lanky figure awkwardly from one large foot to the other, as was his habit when ill at ease, but neither this fidgety movement nor his anxious glances had attracted more than the passing attention of Nettie, whose little head was too full of her own troubles at this moment, to leave her free to consider those of others, as she was usually so ready to do.

The fact of Nettie's personal suffering made her peculiarly sympathetic in her manner towards Ronald, and he, all absorbed as he was by his humble adoration of the distant, cold, and talented Hilda, was



just in the mood to appreciate the tender and child-like proximity and simply-feminine attractions of Baby Nettie.

He looked into her eyes as he had never cared to do before, and found their clear cerulean depths full of a kindly sympathy, which he had so often and quite vainly sought in the darkly pathetic glance of his soul's idol.

He noticed Nettie's pouting lips too, and wished he had a sister just like this sweet saucy maiden, or, better still, that he and she might enter into some fraternal bond in which they could confide all their several thoughts, anxieties, hopes, and fears to one another, take counsel and comfort together, and thus each be better able through the other's strengthening influence, to bear the brunt of the battle of life.

"You have no brother, Miss Nettie?" Ronald enquired, pursuing his train of thought aloud.

"No," said Nettie, smiling wistfully; "I wish we had; girls with brothers to fight their battles for them, are more respected and better looked after



than we, a whole host of lonely females, ever can be.”

“I wish I was your brother, Nettie,” suggested Ronald, and his glance and his tone were so gentle and pleading, that Nettie felt she must really either cry—or kiss him—or run away. . . .

Acting on impulse, as was her wont, she chose the latter course, and considering the surroundings, this was certainly the wisest plan.

But as she hastily made her way towards the lawn-tennis party, Jonathan, pale and trembling, with an unwonted emotion which seemed to make even his auburn locks stand on end, barred her progress.

“Oh! Nettie, Nettie!” he cried, in the rashness of his despair, “you have been encouraging that handsome idle vagabond to make love to you. It wasn’t play, you weren’t teasing, or laughing, or flirting, but you were whispering and looking into one another’s eyes, and, oh! dear, oh! dear, I hardly know what I am saying, but I’m too miserable, and I can’t bear it and I won’t and I’ll speak to your father, or Mary, or—”



“Here am I, Johnny; have you taken leave of your senses, my poor boy?” Mary asked, her calm methodical speech and gentle voice acting like a tranquillising spell on the rising fury and the spasmodic utterances of Curtis, who, reduced to sudden quietude and consequently to a feeling of intense shame at his late outburst, felt himself choking. He was powerless to speak and unwilling to make a still greater fool of himself in public; so, swallowing his anger, his humiliation, and the consequent tears, he turned from the ladies with a silent inclination of his head, and rapidly made his way out of the Gardens, disappearing through the Grove gate.

Nettie, so much surprised and dismayed by this sudden and utterly unexpected demonstration on good, simple Johnny Pry’s part, that she herself was actually reduced to absolute silence, approached her eldest sister, and merely entreated, “Take me home with you, Polly darling.”

But as they were walking away arm-in-arm, Nettie could not resist glancing at the bench where he who had desired to be “her brother” had been seated.



He was there no longer. Then, furtively, and very anxious that Mary should not suspect her intention, the Baby ventured to peep over her sister's shoulder at that group among the trees at the far end of the Gardens. Hilda was still its centre, and Mrs. Toegoode was there, and Estella, and Mrs. Vivian, and Mr. Latimer—but Ronald—no—Ronald was *not* by Hilda's side yet, and suddenly brightening, Nettie cried,

"Come, Poll, we won't go and shut ourselves up in-doors, just because Johnny Pry has chosen to make an idiot of himself. We'll go and have a good game; dear Dosie is longing to have her revenge for a private grievance, and I'll give her the chance now, at once."

Mary was so accustomed to treat Nettie and her varying moods like those of the Baby she still called and considered her fair young sister, that she was not in the least surprised to see her making frantic efforts to arrange a "*parti*", efforts in which Mr. Latimer was, as usual, ready and eager to lend her every assistance.

Perceiving Mrs. Braun seated in solitary state,



that ever new blue-worsted stocking in her hand, Mary went and took her place by the cheerful old lady's side, and these two began cosily chatting together.

Mrs. Braun acquainted Mary with Hilda's intended departure, and also hinted, in strict confidence, of course, that her dear Dosie, she thought, had given her heart to Mr. Latimer, and, naturally, could not approve of a young and unprotected lady who asked for secret interviews with the man of her (Dosie's) choice.

All this was news, and somewhat startling news, to Mary; but a greater surprise for both Mrs. Braun and herself was the sight which now met their astonished gaze.

Mr. Latimer had left the tennis-net, and was slowly sauntering in the direction of Mrs. Vivian's garden, when that lady overtook him, and possessing herself of his hand, drew his arm confidently around her supple waist.

"Mamma! oh! mamma! do you see that?" cried Theodosia, for once quite oblivious of *les convenances*.



"That bad, bold, black-eyed American adventuress has decoyed him, has stolen him from us."

"No, Miss Braun, Mrs. Vivian is not quite so bad as that," said Nettie, who had closely followed Theodosia and heard her outcry. "Mr. Latimer has asked Mrs. Vivian to marry him, and she has just told me that they are *engaged!*"

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## CHAPTER X.

## SCENES.

A SMALL note addressed in a large slanting scrawl and marked "Immediate!!" was handed to Estella, as she, with her sisters, entered their house soon after these very startling occurrences in the Gardens, which fortunately for the persons chiefly concerned, and most especially for hysterical Theodosia, had taken place in the far-away corner near the large sheltering tree, which to Estella must ever be associated with tenderest recollections now.

The majority of the Grenfellians severally occupied in the manner most congenial to them, and, as usual, keeping towards the croquet end of the oval, were quite unaware that anything unusual had happened, while the tennis party coolly consoled themselves for the sudden break-up of their game by making derogatory remarks on the



ridiculous affectations of Miss Braun, who was always crying out about some imaginary grievance. Then the baffled players animadverted on the stuck-uppishness of that Miss Norman, who did not come out to play like the rest of them, but sat apart with her needlework, keeping a watchful eye on her giddy young sisters, and probably thinking ill-natured things of all those who joined in the social games.

All these kind speeches were due to Mary's prompt action on Mrs. Braun's behalf.

Seeing the pitiable state of affairs, and quite aware of the overwhelming ridicule to which "poor dear Dosie" was exposing herself, Mary determined to assign some plausible reason for Miss Braun's sudden retirement from the scene of action. She therefore calmly stated that Miss Miller's ball had inadvertently hit Miss Braun, who was in great pain, and would be unable to continue the game.

Mary had spoken at random, anxious only to give Theodosia the chance of escaping with her mother. But Miss Miller happened to be a careless



player, and was quite aware that her random stroke *might* have caused the accident, which she therefore resented as a personal affront.

These minor details did not trouble Mary, who had at least succeeded in avoiding a still greater public scandal by hurrying the Brauns and her sisters indoors. The note handed to Estella and marked "Immediate," was from Mrs. Toegoode, and ran thus:

"You will greatly oblige me by not mentioning the relationship existing between Miss Trevor and myself. A matter of family prejudice necessitates my making this request, which kindly convey to the Signorina also. Miss Trevor is at home this evening, and if you and Miss Hilda like to look in at No. 25, all might be satisfactorily settled at once. I suggest this as your friend appeared so anxious about the matter.

"P.S. I shall expect you to-morrow morning with more notes for the novel, and an account of what you settle to-night."

The immediate result of this note, which Estella



took round to Hilda, was the visit of that lady to Miss Trevor, of 25, Grenfell-street.

Mary, in accordance with Estella's suggestion, consented to accompany the Signorina and further agreed to conduct the practical part of the interview. During their walk Hilda unhesitatingly confided all the doubts which were perplexing her to Mary, who listened to this recital with the closest attention, though perhaps not as sympathetically as the speaker might have desired.

Having carefully weighed Hilda's ingenuous confession in the well-regulated balance of her mind, Mary, actuated by the good sense and proper pride which were allowed to be her distinguishing qualities, declared her cordial admiration for the prompt and independent action Hilda had taken in this matter.

"It is always questionable policy on the part of an unmarried woman, to place herself under personal obligations to a bachelor," Mary affirmed.

"In future I hope you will allow me to help you in any arrangements you are making, in which you



require advice or assistance. You may rely on my willingness to be of use to you as far as I am able."

Hilda was greatly comforted and reassured by this marked approval of quiet Mary's, of whom the Italian stood in considerable awe.

They found Miss Trevor to be a gentle, sad-faced lady, who suggested a troubled Past rather than any active interest in a colourless Present.

Her house was simply furnished, and without any pretension save to strict order and cleanliness.

If those were, as they appeared to be, the Lares and Penates in this modest establishment, Miss Trevor certainly performed the rites required of her with scrupulous exactitude. She was prepared to give up both her drawing-rooms to the Signorina, merely suggesting that a better piano would be a desideratum, as the lady was musical.

"And my constant practising will cause no annoyance to you, madam?" Hilda considerately enquired, other preliminaries being satisfactorily settled by Mary.

Miss Trevor made no protestations as to her ad-



miration for, or delight in, music; she answered the Signorina by a simple negative.

"You have no other lodgers, I presume?" Miss Norman enquired, just by way of saying something as she rose to take her leave.

She had spoken with perfect indifference, but both she and Hilda were struck by the sudden change in Miss Trevor's pale face and passive manner as she suddenly flushed and eagerly turned towards her interlocutor, whose surprised glance she met with something very like fear in her own.

"I am sure you will pardon me, ladies," she said after a moment's hesitation, and she now for the first time spoke with eagerness, which, however, soon dwindled away again into the passive indifference of tone and manner with which she had received them.

"Perhaps I ought to have mentioned," she said, "that an unfortunate relative resides with me—a widow."

It is on her account I proposed that the Signorina should have her meals in her own apartment. Mrs. Ashe is disfigured—painfully disfigured—by small-



pox. She dreads being seen by strangers, and I would seek to spare any one from so distressing a sight.

"The poor unhappy lady," cried Hilda, compassionately. "It may be that her life is most tranquil and dull, perhaps she will like that we meet at times; she will certainly never need to have any fear of showing herself to me, and I shall hope to make a friend of her to-morrow."

Mrs. Ashe, keeping watch on the upper landing, heard the Signorina's last words, which were spoken as she reached the hall-door.

"God bless her for her sweet voice and her sweet thoughts too," moaned the unhappy widow, whose blurred, distorted face certainly made her an object of compassion, if not of loathing, to her fellow-creatures.

"Did you hear what that good-hearted Signorina said, Ada?" asked Miss Trevor, finding Mrs. Ashe sobbing on the landing above.

"Yes, and I mean to deserve her kindness too; I do, indeed, aunt, indeed."

"If you will only consent to bear your trouble



patiently and make the best of your life now, yes, even *now*—I shall feel that God the Almighty has shown his mercy to both of us, and that my reward for what little good I have done for you has come to me even in this world.” Miss Trevor spoke humbly, reverently, her pure pale face typical of that patient resignation which was embodied in her daily life.

“You shall have your reward, poor dear,” said Mrs. Ashe confidently, “Even as I am having mine.” She pointed to her ruined features, as she spoke.

Once they had been beautiful, and even now Ada had the greatest difficulty in reconciling herself to the loss of the gift she had valued above all others. But her beauty had not brought happiness to herself, and had caused much misery to others.

It was the mild ambition of Miss Trevor’s life to teach her refractory niece the superior value of mental over physical beauty.

While this pathetic scene was being enacted in the new home to which Hilda intended migrating on the morrow, an interview of a very different



nature was taking place in the house she was now most impatient to leave.

Theodosia, supported by her distressed parent, had returned from the Gardens convulsed by hysterical sobs, the outcome of baffled affection, furious jealousy, and impotent rage.

Poor Mrs. Braun, who had never witnessed such a violent demonstration on her dear Dosie's part before, was herself quite overwhelmed by the nature of this catastrophe. Vinegar, eau de cologne, water, brandy, salts of various kinds, and even burnt feathers were applied to the nostrils, the temples, or the lips of the shrieking patient, the promiscuous use of these quasi-restoratives being considered as absolutely necessary by the excited and sympathetic maids who volunteered assistance, and the narration of varied personal experiences in about equal proportions.

It was a wearingly long time before poor Dosie finally lapsed into something like tranquillity, her violent shrieks dwindling down into plaintive sobs and moans.



"I love him so—oh! dear mamma, I love him so; and I would have been such a good, such a devoted wife to him, and now—and now——"

Thus she complained, laying her weary head upon her good old mother's faithful breast, and in her despair turning for comfort and consolation to the parent whom at all other times she was so ready to snub and ridicule.

"It is for Mrs. Vivian's money he is making his court to her, mine Dosie," Mrs. Braun suggested, by way of accounting for Latimer's perversity.

"But I have money, too!" cried Theodosia, raising herself from the sofa on which she had been placed; "and mine is in Consols—safe and sure, while hers is in American mines and railways, and trash of that sort, and may all be lost to-morrow. I only wish and hope it has all been swallowed up this very day by some rash Transatlantic speculation of hers—bold, bad, black, designing old widow-woman."

"Mr. Latimer, hearing Miss Braun was taken ill in the Gardens, has just come in to know if he can be of any assistance, ma'am," said the parlour-



maid, and stood at the door awaiting her mistress's reply.

"Is my hair disarranged?" asked Theodosia, flushing; and anxious to see for herself, jumped up from the sofa and hurried across to the looking-glass. "Bring me down my powder-box and a hairbrush, Simpson," she said; and turning towards her mother, begged her to lower the blinds. "I don't want him to see that I have been crying," she said, by way of explanation.

"But you surely will not at all see him?" cried Mrs. Braun in consternation.

"Certainly I will, and at once, and alone!" answered Theodosia. "The girl Hilda is allowed to solicit private interviews—why should not I?"

"Do not; pray do not let him know of your weakness, Dosie, mine poor, dear Dosie," implored Mrs. Braun, who with all her indulgent good-nature, had some strict notions on the reserve becoming to a "junges Mädchen."

In Mrs. Braun's vocabulary all unmarried women were "young girls."

Presently Mr. Latimer entered the drawing-room,



the lowered blinds of which shut out the already dying light of day.

"You have been ill, I hear. A ball struck you. Were you really hurt?" he said, advancing towards the couch on which Theodosia was still gracefully reclining.

"Your hands are very feverish," he added, having taken them tenderly into his cool ones. "I am much distressed, and beg you will reassure me as to the nature of the injury you received."

Instead of replying to this anxious enquiry, Theodosia said, in a voice which she succeeded in controlling—

"I believe I am to congratulate you, Mr. Latimer, on your engagement to Mrs. Vivian?"

"Spare me that irony!" cried he, fervently pressing the hands he had never relinquished.

And in another moment, he was on his knees by her side, his noble head hidden in the ample folds of her silk skirt, his huge body convulsed—yes, actually convulsed—with grief.

Brokenly, amid his sobs, his face still discreetly concealed, he confessed to Theodosia that he loved



her, and her only, but that necessity had compelled him to accept some pecuniary assistance from Mrs. Vivian at a moment when he was greatly embarrassed.

It was at that time that Mrs. Vivian had further proposed to solve all further difficulties by entering into a matrimonial alliance with him, which would cancel all his obligations.

“And you have loved me all this weary, heart-breaking time?” cried Theodosia, rapturously.

His fond embrace and the kiss he impressed on her trembling lips was more than sufficient answer for her.

She had always felt he loved her—always known it, and she was so happy—“oh! so happy now!”

Latimer seated himself by her side, drew her towards him, kissed her cheek, and asked her if she would grant him a favour. As if there was anything she could refuse him now?

The Anti-Bee scheme was “flourishing magnificently,” he said, the money he owed Mrs. Vivian



would soon be repaid; but until that debt was discharged, he must not, he dare not, think of securing his happiness by making Theodosia his wife, or even by declaring the engagement which now of course was binding on her as well as on himself.

"Then we must keep it secret for a while, just for a little while?" whispered Theodosia anxiously.

He told her secrecy was imperative until he had freed himself from the debt and the engagement to Mrs. Vivian, which at present were embarrassing him to a most painful extent.

"Would a thousand pounds help you out of your difficulty?" whispered Theodosia, leaning her head against his shoulder and timidly pressing her lips on his ear as she spoke.

"Ah! do not let any considerations of a mercantile nature interfere in this our first happy hour of mutually acknowledged love," he cried earnestly, and again fell on his knees before this "tender, sweet, generous, and most devoted of women."

In that delicious moment of her triumphant love, Theodosia would gladly—gladly have handed



him over the entire fortune which, by her father's will, she had held in her own right since her twenty-fifth birth-day, now some fifteen years ago.

It was well for her, though perhaps not for her lover, that her fortune had been so closely tied up that she could not touch a penny of it without going through endless legal formalities.

She laid her hand upon his silky white hair, confessed that she had always thought it "so beautiful," pressed her lips upon it, with a sigh bade him rise, and added, "You will not mind my telling *our* mamma, dear Peregrine, will you?"

But Peregrine did mind, and very emphatically impressed this fact on Dosie, who began to tremble as he knitted his brows and spoke in that stern tone which had already terrified her more than once.

"If you cannot be silent for a time, only a short time, Dosie darling," he said, when he saw how his severity had alarmed her, "you will ruin our chances of future happiness by compelling me to sell myself to Mrs. Vivian, and thus cancelling my debt and obligation."



Then Theodosia solemnly declared that she would be absolutely silent.

All she asked for was his continued love, and the occasional assurance of it when they were alone together.

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## CHAPTER XI.

## INDEPENDENCE.

"I HAVE read your manuscript with the greatest attention, Miss Estella," said St. Helier, rising to receive the young authoress as she came towards him on the morning following their first clandestine interview, and laid her hand in his with a beaming smile.

She was as radiant as the glorious summer morning, of which she appeared to St. Helier as the incarnation.

He had thought a great deal about her charming face, her still more charming manner, and her varied talents too, since their previous interview. And he had paced his room both last night and this morning tormented by his restless anxiety as to whether or no she *would* dare to come into the Gardens, as he had implored her to do.



Now she stood before him, sparkling with health and content, and he felt not only joyful, but most sincerely grateful to her for the intense pleasure her presence there was causing him.

Old Santarelli's letter, and the enigma suggested by Hilda's conduct, had still perplexed him a little during the morning, but now that he saw Estella face to face it seemed to him that this was the only woman in the world worth thinking about at all.

"Have you really taken the trouble to look at this?" she said, seizing her manuscript with that irrepressible eagerness with which one recovers a missing treasure.

"Indeed I have done far more than look at it," he replied earnestly, "I have read every word most attentively—"

"And what do you think of it?" she cried, unable to conceal her growing anxiety.

"I think it is excellent," said he, "absolutely original, fresh in style, fresh in ideas, simple and wholesome. I sincerely congratulate you on what I



consider a very interesting and remarkably well written story."

"You call it a story?" queried Estella. "Doesn't it deserve the title of a novel?"

"You wish me to speak candidly?" he asked.

"Or not at all, she answered decisively, and met his earnest gaze bravely with hers.

"There is not plot enough for such a novel as would suit the requirements of the day," he said, and said it deprecatingly, so anxious was he to avoid causing her the slightest pain.

"By plot I suppose you mean fraud, or murder, or bigamy, or other dreadful violences of that sort?" asked Estella, in a disappointed tone.

"I will show you what I mean presently," said he; "and I do not doubt that you will understand me. I have ventured to write out some notes, tracing a skeleton plot, as it were, and if you should approve of my suggestion, you can easily clothe it all in your own pleasing and effective language.

"You are very good, and I thank you," she



said; but she evidently was quite unable to appreciate the nature of the service he had done her at this moment.

She was still too much mortified to find her mind's first-born was not considered perfect, to be able to regard its possible successor with anything but disfavour.

"I endeavoured to write quite simply," she explained, "and truthfully to tell the story of my heroine's country life as I myself have lived it.

"I know nothing of plot, or horrors, or villains and evil machinations; and how could I possibly write of things quite out of the narrow circle of my experience? . . . I will not err a second time by asking you about the plots in *your* life," she added, with a dawning smile at the recollection of their first interview in the Gardens, which now seemed to her to have happened years instead of months ago.

"And you disdain my attempt at suggestion?" he asked, drawing a folded paper from his pocket.

"Indeed, no; and I am sure, when I have got over this silly feeling of disappointment and morti-



fication, and am in my right senses again, I shall heartily thank you for it."

She took the paper from his hand as she spoke in a very dejected tone; and he, glancing up at her erst so happy face, saw tears glistening on her long dark lashes.

"I have made you unhappy!" he cried, conscience-stricken; "oh! why did I speak as I thought?"

"Because I asked you to do so," she answered, and smiled as she spoke. "I was foolish," she continued, smiling still, "I wished to accomplish straight away what others spend years of thought, and study, and endless trouble in achieving. I quite understand now what Mrs. Toegoode meant when she said that a literary career was a continual struggle, and that a certain apprenticeship must be served, and a definite routine had to be followed before one could aspire to success."

"In some respects Adela-ida's opinions are mine also," said St. Helier; "but she was not speaking of your individual case, of which she can have known nothing."



"No, her remarks were general," Estella admitted.

"And your case is peculiar," said he; "you are richly endowed by Nature, to start with.

"You have keen powers of observation, a sense of humour, which is unusual in a woman, and a remarkable facility for clothing your ideas in most effective language."

She brightened wonderfully again, as she listened to this encouraging speech, which fell like balm upon her wounded spirit.

He saw and rejoiced in the effect of his last words.

"I am so grateful to you for coming out this morning," he began, changing his tone also, as he dropped the now vexed question of her authorship.

"Ah! and you are *here*, Estella!" exclaimed Hilda, suddenly appearing before her friends, who were far too much engrossed in one another's words and looks to have thoughts or eyes for what was happening about them.



"You seem quite alarmed," she added laughing, "and regard me as if I was a bogie—bogie it is called, isn't it?—instead of a very prosaic young woman who walked over the gravel path in the most unromantic manner."

"Nettie told me you were with Mrs. Toegoode, Estella," the Signorina added, almost apologetically, as she became convinced, by the embarrassed looks and the odd silence of those two, that her presence was irksome to them.

"I was on my way to Mrs. Toegoode, with whom I have an appointment," said Estella, and her voice and manner struck Hilda as strangely constrained. "I hope you will excuse me; I should not like to keep Mrs. Toegoode waiting," she added, trying to regain possession of her manuscript, which St. Helier again held in his hand. As she touched it he clasped it the more resolutely, and she dared not demand it from him, lest Hilda should suspect that it had been given to him at a previous interview.

St. Helier was keenly alive to the situation, and



quite understood the nature and extent of Estella's embarrassment. He rejoiced in it, more especially as he still retained possession of that precious manuscript, and therefore felt quite convinced that Estella on some future occasion would yet again *dare* to come and demand its restitution from him.

These were his pleasant reflections as he watched her tripping lightly away over the grass, and making straight for Mrs. Toegoode's garden entrance.

He smiled at his thoughts, but Hilda, who had just taken the place so suddenly vacated by Estella, did not smile at all.

She was considerably troubled and perplexed.

Estella was so strange, so cold, so unsympathetic to-day, and yet last night they had parted on such excellent terms. Were all the English women fickle and capricious, and unreliable, blowing hot friendship one day and cold nonchalance the next?

Or was Estella, like Theodosia, herself in the wrong, and was it the consciousness of her own



breach of faith which had caused her to speak so distantly, so unkindly to the injured person? That such had been Theodosia's practice, Hilda had unfortunately learnt to her cost; but Estella?—no, Estella was cast in a far nobler mould than the soured spinster at No. 39; and thus reassuring herself, Hilda felt quite convinced that Estella would not have disclosed any of those novel plans for the future to St. Helier, since Hilda had so particularly desired he should not be troubled about her affairs any more.

His first words convinced her of his absolute ignorance of the events which had made the last two days so very important to her.

“Signor Scuro came to me yesterday,” said St. Helier, “and told me that Lord Goselyngge desired to pay you a visit in the double capacity of a humble admirer, as well as the discriminating chief of the great Diamond Opera.”

“In the latter, or professional capacity, he did come to me yesterday,” said Hilda, more elated than she would have cared to confess by the



sudden interest her words had aroused in St. Helier's face.

He looked at her with a keenly-searching glance, as he asked, "And he made you some proposition about singing for him?"

"More than that," said Hilda; "he offered me the chance of a *début* in his theatre next month.

"I have acceded to his terms, or his stipulation—what should I say? and the agreement will be dutifully signed to-morrow."

"But my dear child," cried St. Helier, somewhat aghast at these surprising revelations, "how could you possibly have undertaken to settle such an affair—a regular business matter—without sending for or coming to consult me?"

Hilda was gratified beyond measure by the result of her new tactics.

Two nights ago she had plainly perceived that St. Helier had no desire whatever to be troubled any further about her affairs, and to-day, at the very moment in which he discovered that she had



taken an important step without first consulting him, he began to protest, and was evidently very much interested in her plans.

He himself was perfectly aware of the incongruity of his proceedings.

He had felt that the fact of his assuming any kind of control or guardianship of the lonely Signorina had compromised them both in the eyes of others, and yet he no sooner found her acting independently, than he resented her doing so as though she were thus causing him some grievous injury.

"You must allow me to look over the legal document to which you intend to affix your signature to-morrow," he said, after some consideration.

"I am sorry that I can *not*," she said, better pleased by his impatient manner and his frowning looks, than by any verbose compliments he could have paid her.

His dismay proved that he still cared about her.



If she had become as indifferent to him as Theodosia and circumstances had led her to believe, he would have rejoiced in every fact which drove her to decide on an independent course likely to sever all connection between them.

“And pray, what can induce you to say that you can *not* allow me to guard you from being unduly inveigled into signing some agreement which may perhaps bind you irrevocably, while it leaves the other side free and quit of all responsibility?”

“Mr. Latimer has kindly consented to look after my portion of this agreement,” said Hilda very seriously, but in her heart she was again rejoicing over the charming results of her lately adopted line of action.

St. Helier was more than dismayed now; he was furious.

“What business has Mr. Latimer to trouble himself about your private affairs?” he asked hoarsely; “it seems to me that that gentleman is far too fond of meddling in matters which concern him not at all,”



"In this case your blame is certainly undeserved on his part," said Hilda, warming generously on behalf of the absentee. "It is by my particular request that Mr. Latimer has undertaken to settle all the business preliminary with Giacomo Arrow-smith—his lordship's factotum."

"Then I may conclude that Mr. Latimer fills a corresponding *rôle vis-à-vis* the Signorina Santarelli?" St. Helier said, rising, and bowing coldly.

"Here is Mr. Latimer to speak for himself," cried Hilda, also rising to meet the silver-haired Adonis, on whom the thoughts of two of the Lady Grenfellians were so tenderly concentrated already.

"Pray, let him speak for himself, and for you and to you, as much as you please," said St. Helier, turning away; "but pardon me if I cannot remain as a listener."

He really took his leave as he spoke, and all the enjoyment died out of Hilda's face and out of her spirit, as she watched him hastily striding away towards the little gate, and making his exit thence.



She had carried the triumphant joke of her independence too far. He was offended, he had left her in anger; and this very day she was going among strangers again, this time without his approval, without his co-operation, without his knowledge even!

"Noon on a broiling summer's day is a strange hour for us three to be out in the recreation-ground," cried Latimer advancing, and flinging himself down upon the seat St. Helier had so hurriedly vacated on his account. Latimer was grateful for the resting place thus prepared for him; how it happened to be so opportunely at his disposal he neither knew nor cared.

"I thought you would wish us to be very particular about all the items connected with the agreement before you are bound by it, Signorina," he presently continued, "and so I have called upon my lawyer on your behalf, and 'made assurance doubly sure' where you are concerned."

"Thank you. I feel that my case is quite safe in your experienced care," said Hilda.

"I am surprised and grieved to hear that you



intend leaving our happy circle at Madame Braun's," he remarked regretfully. "I hope you are not going far away."

She told him of the arrangements made for her by Miss Norman.

"I could have wished, for your sake and that of the charming and sociable Mrs. Vivian, that you would have accepted her oft-repeated invitation and gone to stay with her, at least for a time."

"Is it true that that lady is your *fiancée*, Mr. Latimer?" asked Hilda, who suddenly remembered what she had heard, "and may I congratulate you?"

"Hush, I pray you," he whispered nervously, and his alarmed glance in the direction of No. 39 betrayed the reason of his fears. "We desire to keep the matter secret just at present, for the sake of Roland, and for other family considerations."

Hilda listened, vaguely amused at this sudden desire to suppress a fact which Mrs. Vivian herself had unhesitatingly announced on the previous day,



"The fact is, I have come out now to offer matutinal homage to my queen," Latimer continued, with unabated nervousness. "But, as the engagement must be kept secret *pro tem.*, I am particularly anxious that Miss — Miss Theodosia should not know you met me on my way to Mrs. Vivian's."

"You may rest assured of my discretion," said Hilda smiling, and really amused at the fact that this sturdy giant should actually quail before the possible displeasure of that unhappy, cross-grained spinster, Theodosia.

"It is time for me to go in now," said the Signorina rising. "I will say *au revoir* to you, Mr. Latimer."

"We meet at your new residence to-morrow?"

"At twelve o'clock, if you please," said she, and turned to go.

"And you will quite forget that you have seen me this morning," he resumed, detaining her.

"My mind is a blank as far as you are concerned," she replied, and left him to keep his appointment with the Shoddy-Princess, while she



made her way for the last time to the home of the confiding spinster, who firmly believed that she alone was the arbiter of Peregrine Latimer's much-coveted allegiance.

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## CHAPTER XII.

## MONEY AND HONEY.

HILDA SANTARELLI, with her brunette complexion and dark eyes, was not an ideal "Gretchen" according to stage tradition; but the girlish simplicity of her bearing, her frank smile, and a certain thrilling pathos in her glorious voice, adapted her admirably for the successful performance of the *rôle* of Gounod's unfortunate *prima-donna*.

As Margherita in opera, Hilda was likely, aye, sure, to excel.

So said and thought her friends and her admirers, the circle of whom had been considerably enlarged since the Signorina's social *début* at the Countess of Dewminster's.

The Dowager herself had called upon the Signorina on two occasions, accompanied by her son Benjamin,



He came because he hoped to meet Miss Estella Norman again, who, he understood, was very often in the company of the Italian lady, for whom she had avowed her affection to him on the night of their first meeting.

How happy the reflected glory of the Countess' visits would have made Miss Braun if her ladyship's ancient but coronetted barouche had stopped at the door of No. 39.

But since Hilda no longer dwelt there, the honour of her ladyship's visits was transferred to the unimportant dwellings of Grenfell Street, the quiet inhabitants of which no doubt regarded the lordly equipage with wonder and awe.

Mr. Raynewater's desire was gratified on the occasion of her ladyship's second visit to the Signorina.

Estella happened to be with her friend that afternoon, and while the Dowager was entreating Hilda to be sure and secure her ladyship a box for the night of her *début*, a petition which the guileless Italian accepted as a personal compliment, instead



of a selfish economy, Mr. Raynewater thoroughly enjoyed the complete monopoly of Estella, whom he found even more charming during this chance interview than on the night of the grand "At-Home."

He was, indeed, so fascinated by the girl's beauty and wit that he emphatically declared to his mother that "that Miss Norman was the only lady he had set eyes on since his return to England whom he would be proud to call his wife."

"Don't talk nonsense, Ben," her ladyship replied, with a good-natured smile. "You must marry money."

"Money be——"

What money might be, according to the Honourable Benjamin, who was no longer in a good temper, need not be recorded.

"Make that old toady of yours, Mrs. Adela-ida, find out all the particulars of this young lady's parentage and expectations, mother," suggested Benjamin, presently. "I never saw such jolly rebellious hair as she has, or such a saucy pair of laughing



eyes. Upon my soul, I'd even accept some lucrative appointment for her sake if they'd pay me enough to enable me to keep a wife and a comfortable establishment."

The Dowager was really alarmed when she heard her idle son make such an enterprising declaration.

She knew then that Miss Estella must have made a far deeper impression on his susceptible heart than she had previously had any idea of.

To think of her spoilt, lazy little Ben talking of earning his living! Faith, she had heard, could move mountains; love, she might soon affirm, had a still greater power if it induced her younger son to become industrious.

"Let us talk to Honey Latimer about putting me in the way of making money, mother," Benjamin suggested when they arrived at home after that visit to Grenfell Street, where the arch glance of the charmer had revived all the luckless youth's slumbering passion.

Honey Latimer was talked to by mother and son, and agreed to make a little fortune for them



both if they would consent to his investing a moderate sum for them, say £500, in shares in the Great Anti-Bee scheme.

“I quite expect to treble your original outlay and return it to you with the profits in three months’ time,” he said confidently. “The shares are going up every day now; we can scarcely allot them fast enough. There is such a run on the Company since the public have begun to appreciate the money-yielding possibilities of our scheme.”

“I am glad you are not such a fool as to talk philanthropy and that sort of cant to us, Mr. Latimer,” the Countess remarked, with a hearty laugh. “For my own part, I’m not at all ashamed to declare that I care a vast deal more about making ready money, and plenty of it for myself, than I do about the feeding of the vulgar million with that honey which they are suddenly supposed to find so very delectable.”

The result of young Benjamin’s growing passion and consequent ambition was the yielding of the £500 which Latimer had so generously undertaken to treble, and the frequent presence of the Honour-



able Mr. Raynewater in the social recreation-ground at those hours in which the ladies were wont to make their appearance in the Gardens.

Why he came there so frequently now, and whose company he sought, was not long a secret to the Grenfellians, the female section of whom speedily became jealous of the distinction thus accorded to Estella Norman, and were not slow now in finding faults in that young lady's appearance and manners, which had never been suspected until Mr. Raynewater's attentions made her so very conspicuous.

Mr. Latimer, the claims on whose time had increased in exact proportion to the rapidly extending operations of the wonderful Anti-Bee Company, was seldom seen either in the Gardens or at No. 39 now.

"I am making money, making money for *us* now, as fast as I can," he told Dosie when she, tenderly clinging to him, pathetically enquired how long, how much longer this terrible ordeal of secrecy was to be endured? She had soon induced him to



confide to her, that the sum Mrs. Vivian had lent him was two thousand pounds.

Within a week of this startling confession Theodosia for the first time went up to Mr. Latimer's study and timidly knocked at the door of the small room reserved for his private use at the top of the house.

No sooner had he admitted her, and somewhat harshly remonstrated with her for running such wild risks as this unprecedented visit, than she, after passionately asserting that no one had the slightest suspicion of their engagement, or of her present visit to her beloved, told him that she had gone to her trustee and with him to her lawyer's and obtained possession of one thousand pounds out of the ten, which constituted her fortune.

"You shall have the money to-morrow, my dearest best Peregrine," she cried breathlessly, as she extricated herself from his passionate embrace. "As you are doing so well now, I am sure you will soon be able to double this sum, and then you will be free, and this odious secrecy can end with your payment of the debt into which that horrid de-



signing Shoddy-Princess managed to inveigle you, with the sole object of getting you into her jealous clutches."

At this impartial version of his relations with Mrs. Vivian, Latimer laughed heartily and Dosie joined in his boisterous merriment with a right good-will too.

"With your consent I shall invest your thousand pounds in Anti-Bee shares, my sweet generous Dosie," he said after a little consideration. "Your name, in which the shares shall be taken, will be sure to bring us luck.

"The sum you thus invest will probably be doubled within a month and still be yours."

"Only to hand back to you again, my beloved," she said, stooping to kiss him as he sat at his writing table.

But he at this moment was too much engrossed by mercantile considerations to respond warmly to her blandishments, for he now drew forth a number of papers, some written, some printed lists of names and figures, and finally a huge official prospectus



and sundry minutes of the Great Anti-Bee Company.

All these documents he spread out before Theodosia, carefully marking and explaining their manifold intricacies, and exhaustively answering all her enquiries, the shrewdness and perspicacity of which, he declared, "delighted as well as surprised him."

Theodosia for her part was greatly delighted too. She felt that she had just been personally elected as a member of that Aristocracy of speculative enterprise which made English men and English women too (?) the proudest as well as the wealthiest of the rulers of commerce.

She certainly looked ten years younger after this eminently satisfactory interview with her lover, and went tripping downstairs with quite a girlish exuberance of spirits.

She was even singing "Tra-la, la, la, la!" and laughing gaily as she entered the linen-room, in the commodious presses of which the thrifty Hausfrau was storing away some of those heaps of fine linen which she had brought from her parental home with



her, in accordance with the good old German notion of what a handsome dowry should be.

The mother turned round, surprised at her daughter's jubilant voice and dancing step.

"Mine Dosie, what is it?" she cried.

Then Dosie, without volunteering any explanation, put her arm around her mother's neck and kissed her affectionately on both cheeks.

"We are ever so much better off by ourselves, without that howling and flirting Italian woman," Miss Braun remarked presently.

"I am so glad if you are happy, mine dear Dosie, but I do feel you are liddel hard to that innocent Signorina, who really is a goot and quite a harmless girl and whose singing was certainly the most fine we have ever any of us heard before. I am sure Mr. Lat—Mr. *Curtis* I mean" (the old lady hastily substituted the latter name as she saw a suspicious gleam in her daughter's eyes), "Mr. Curtis is in quite a melancholy state since Miss Hilda has left us. Have you not noticed that he is so quiet and so sad, Dosie; what can be ailing this poor young man?"



"Perhaps he is in love," suggested Dosie; "but no, he would be happy in that case," she added, with the conviction of one who thoroughly understood her subject.

"I think it is some business with him and Mr. Latimer," said Mrs. Braun a little anxiously, "those two are no longer such thick friends as they used to be before Mr. Latimer spent so much of his time in the City, as he has to do since he has this fresh and great appointment."

"Jonathan Curtis has served his apprenticeship under Mr. Norman's slow old-fashioned *régime*," explained Theodosia loftily. "He is quite behind the times and can't enter into the spirit of enterprise which characterises the present state of commerce, and so he and Mr. Latimer, who has a master-mind, differ on many points and can't be expected to pull together."

"You speak like a book, mine Dosie darling," said her mother proudly. "If I had as much talents in my finger as you can spare from your great mind, I would go in business myself and make a great fortune too."



"Suppose I were to try instead, dear mamma?" said Theodosia coaxingly, and her mother finding the "child" very loveable in this pretty playful mood, contented herself by smiling fondly and declaring that it was "a most great pleasure to find her Dosie making fun and jokes."

It will be a still greater pleasure when I have realized the fortune in earnest, thought Theodosia, and ran away to the piano, anxious to vent her overflowing spirits in jubilant dance music and brilliant capriccios.

Good-natured old Mrs. Braun was perfectly justified in her comments on the change in the relations between Mr. Latimer and his quondam disciple and adorer "Johnny Pry."

That unfortunate young man, to whom life had hitherto always worn a very bright and hopeful prospect, had of late suffered acutely, and through the persons he had most loved and esteemed in all the world.

What cruel pangs he endured on account of Nettie has been told already, nor did her subsequent



indifference towards him at all reconcile him to the fact that the only smiles he now saw upon her pretty face were called forth by the presence of his rival.

That Ronald was his rival, and his fortunate rival, poor Jonathan constantly repeated to himself now, but no amount of repetition made the distressing fact easier to credit, or pleasanter to realise.

And now another private grievance was added to Jonathan's growing anxieties, by the strange conduct of Peregrine Latimer, of whose novel speculation in the City startling accounts came to the ever ready ears of Johnny, whose intensely inquisitive nature compelled him to pry into and listen for the minutest details of any transaction in which persons of his acquaintance were engaged.

It was not a noble pursuit, but it certainly had one redeeming feature in Jonathan's case. He was never actuated by ill-nature, he was always more distressed than pleased when ill-tidings came to his knowledge, and he was now making himself perfectly miserable because he heard such very disad-



vantageous accounts of Mr. Latimer's much vaunted Anti-Bee scheme.

At first the notion of money manufactured by steam, had been pooh-poohed and utterly ridiculed as out of all reasonable question. But lately the enterprise, backed by capital and pushed by such very enterprising men as Sir Fulsome Venture and Mr. Peregrine Latimer, was really beginning to assume considerable proportions, and Jonathan's chief anxiety was that Latimer might induce Mr. Norman to join the speculation which the Honorary Secretary certainly had a marvellous knack of painting in delusively bright colours.

That Mrs. Vivian possessed a very considerable number of shares Curtis had ascertained, and it had for a moment (an uncommonly selfish moment) occurred to him to wish that Master Ronald also might have a nibble at this golden goose, and so lose his own nest-egg.

But in this ungenerous desire Jonathan was baffled, for Ronald was far too much engrossed by his sentimental anxieties to trouble in the least about his income, of which far more than he re-



quired for his modest manner of life was handed to him in regular quarterly instalments, as his late grandfather had arranged should be the order of things until his grandson reached his thirtieth year, when, if he chose to marry, the bulk of his fortune would be at his own disposal entirely.

Mary Norman was the only person to whom poor Jonathan was able to turn for sympathy and consolation in these his first weary days of trouble and perplexity. And Mary, who listened with unflagging interest and inexhaustible patience to the lengthy recital of Johnny's woes, certainly manifested a tenderer and a more lenient spirit on these occasions than any of her own people would have deemed her capable of.

Mary was really very much attached to Jonathan. She had known him since they were all children together in those happy simple Oakhurst days, when Mr. Norman, who went away to London and his business every day, would often take Johnny up to town with him to introduce him to his future home in the City. Johnny was Mr. Norman's ward, and an orphan, and he had always been looked upon as



one of the family by the Norman girls, as well as by their father. Mary had bestowed quite maternal care on her small adopted brother, when first he came to Oakhurst, after the death of his mother, and spent his holidays with Nettie as his chief playmate and companion.

He was but twelve years old then, and Nettie only ten, whereas Mary, who had just reached her fifteenth birthday, appeared to her juniors to be "quite grown-up," by reason of her few additional years.

In those happy bygone days, to which Mary often referred with quite a pathetic regret, she had been Johnny's chief protectress and unvaryingly kind friend, and this gentle interest on her part had not been changed by the lapse of years. She was quite as fond of "poor Johnny" now as she had been twelve years ago, and quite as ready to blame mischievous Nettie for teasing her adorer to-day, as she used to be during the old struggles for supremacy in which Nettie usually came off victorious.

It was a wonderful comfort to Jonathan to find that the grave and sensible Miss Norman, who



ruled her father's household with such wise discretion, was just as ready still to listen to his complaints and confidences as the kind girl friend of his lonely and loveless boyhood.

The very day following that very ill-advised display of his love and his jealousy in the Gardens, Mary had sought an opportunity of inviting the poor fellow's confidence, and ever since that time Johnny had come to her of his own accord, pouring his doubts and griefs, and perplexities into her sympathetic ear, and gratefully striving to act as she advised him, for the best.

To worry Nettie at this moment would be worse than useless, and could only serve to strengthen her liking for Ronald, which at present was but a passing fancy.

"If opposition is offered to her now she will turn obstinate," Mary declared, "whereas if she is left to 'gang her ain gait,' the chances are this budding affection will be blown away before it has even had time to take root."

Jonathan felt there was wisdom in these remarks, and resolved to prove himself as indifferent



towards his adored one as she certainly set him the example of being by her own conduct towards him.

Estella knew very little of what was happening around her at this time. She was too entirely absorbed by her private anxieties, among the chief of which was the fact that she had gone out into the Gardens for three consecutive mornings, but had vainly awaited Mr. St. Helier, and the restitution of her manuscript.

The fact was that St. Helier had gladly availed himself of the valid excuse of a brief which necessitated his presence at Winchester Assizes, to escape from town, from himself, and his conflicting passions. Those contradictory but all-engrossing thoughts, anent the authoress and the enigma, were really making his life a burden to him.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

## HILDA'S DÉBUT.

As Margherita, it was finally decided by the authorities at the Diamond Opera House that Hilda should make her *début*.

Margherita's Jewel song had in the first instance captivated Lord Goselyngge, when he listened to the Signorina's rendering of it, on the occasion of their first meeting.

Since then, scarcely a day had passed on which his lordship had not found some plausible pretext for an interview with his new *prima-donna*.

The Signorina's perfect simplicity charmed, just as her voice and her unconventionality fascinated him.

His acquaintance with *prime-donne* had already been considerable, and he somewhat rudely declared



them in the aggregate to be "a captious, conceited, lazy, and unreliable lot."

It was this detrimental opinion of his, which induced him invariably to decline to have any personal dealings with professional ladies, whom it seemed to him quite impossible to please.

But with the gentle, inexperienced Hilda he found no such difficulty.

He was only too eager, as he knew her better, to discover some pretext for constantly seeing her.

"Business" was of course always a valid excuse, and one for which the girl considered it her bounden duty to waive all other considerations.

If Lord Goselyngge sent a note or a telegram desiring half-an-hour's conversation with her on business of importance, she felt that she was absolutely obliged either to be at home to receive him at the hour he had named, or to present herself at the theatre, if those were his orders.

It had not as yet occurred to her that she as



the lady should assume the right to command his lordship. At present she regarded herself virtually as in his employ, and therefore her strong sense of duty dictated obedience to the master's orders.

It might be all the better if this sense of the relative duty between employee and employer were more generally understood and practised in all professions.

When his lordship's summons requested the Signorina's appearance at the theatre, it was that she might be present at special rehearsals, which were called for her convenience on several occasions.

The stage here was so much larger than that of the small theatre in Rome, where her master of deportment had "drilled" her, that she must take every possible opportunity to familiarize herself with the large arena in which she was henceforth "to show off her paces." It was thus his lordship more forcibly than elegantly put the case to her.

She accepted his manifold attentions graciously. That of course. Courtesy was an instinct with her,



which had, under her father's amiable supervision, been trained to an accomplishment. But it never occurred to her that the young lord's anxiety for her comfort and her convenience was unusual. It was on account of her voice and her successful *début* as an actress that he took so much trouble in visiting her to arrange preliminaries, and in giving her the benefit of those extra rehearsals.

That any feeling of personal admiration for her as a woman could be influencing her new and powerful friend and ally, was a thought which as yet had certainly never entered her mind.

She was, as discriminating old Mrs. Braun had so often declared, guileless, and also quite without personal vanity or conceit.

Her voice was a sacred treasure, a talent entrusted to her by the great Master of All.

A gift to be jealously guarded, and of which she had both right and reason to be proud.

She was at this time wholly absorbed by her desire to acquit herself honourably of her new undertaking, and to do credit to the man who was now



giving her the first chance of taking her place in the honourable rank of aspiring artists. And she devoted her time and her thoughts wholly to the perfecting of the *rôle* in which she most earnestly desired to excel.

Mrs. Ashe, for whom Hilda from the first moment of their meeting had shown nought but tenderest consideration and compassion, was urged by the Signorina to accompany her, whenever she was compelled to attend rehearsals.

"You are too fearfully alone, your life is too monotone here," Hilda declared. "It would be quite a change for you to come with me, and cannot fail to do you great good in every way. It will be far more amusing for you surely, than the long walks you take with your aunt in the evening. You need not lift your veil, of course. It seems to be the mode in London for ladies to hide their faces altogether."

Miss Trevor, who was usually so reticent in the expression of any emotion, not only felt, but gratefully acknowledged the Signorina's kindness in



making this suggestion, which she declared to be quite a feasible method of giving poor Ada a little glimpse of the brighter things which seemed to have so completely vanished out of her isolated life now.

So it was settled that Mrs. Ashe, her poor scarred face concealed by a thick veil of Maltese lace, which had the effect of a mask, should accompany the Signorina on every possible occasion.

Lord Goselyngge did not at all approve of this black-faced chaperon. But when Hilda in her generous way explained the unfortunate widow's circumstances to him, he yielded with as good a grace as men do yield to the woman who, for the time being, is the one woman in the world to them.

At the theatre the Signorina's "black domino" soon came to be the object of joking and derision, and this unkind feeling was not lessened by the fact that Lord Goselyngge himself treated both the Signorina and the "Black Domino" with marked courtesy and deference on all occasions.



This cavilling jealousy on the part of all the other singers, professional "ladies and gentlemen" being quite of one accord as to the scant mercy to be shown to an *interloper*, came to a climax, the night before the Signorina's *début*.

Up to this moment her position was insecure. She *might* fail to please the public, and it may without injustice be assumed that many of Hilda's professional sisters, and brothers too, earnestly desired that she should fail.

"There are too many in the field already," remarked one old stager, and that was the predominant feeling in the jealous breast of each of Hilda's captious critics.

"*I* (he or she, as the case might be) have a still smaller chance of advancement if this stranger, this novice, should succeed; and therefore I will do all I can to discourage, discomfit, and ridicule her, and that pretentious Black Domino of hers."

This was the spirit of welcome and encouragement for the novice behind the scenes.



What was it in front?

An expectant crowd chiefly characterised by its absorption in individual interests, and by remarks whispered by one to another on the appearance or the companions of a third person.

As for the new singer? Bah! new singers were plentiful. This was just the time of year for them to crop up. And, as a rule, they would do far better if they would consent to remain in peaceful obscurity. Better for themselves, because they would be spared the needless humiliation of a public failure, and better for the audience, because it was assuredly better to listen to some seasoned mediocrity, who understood her business thoroughly, than to witness the nervous tremors of a *débutante*.

There had been very promising paragraphs in various journals anent this particular *prima-donna*, but then there never yet was a *prima-donna* whose advent had not been heralded with brazen trumpet blasts, thanks to personal influence or the patronage of deluded friends.



Well, the overture has commenced; there is not much time left now ere vague speculation must give place to some kind of certainty.

What pretty girls those three are in the stage-box!

The one with the shining eyes and the dark hair, with lilies-of-the-valley in it, must be some relation of the *débutante*.

She looks so intensely interested, and the hand which toys with her fan trembles visibly. She certainly is the prettiest girl in the theatre. If the singer is as attractive, there is something to hope for yet.

But surely the fair-haired girl by her side is much more like what one supposes Gretchen should be. She has a rosy baby-like face, and really looks as child-like as Goethe must have desired his innocent heroine to appear.

Can those two young girls be sisters?

The third young lady in the further corner is dark too, and evidently much older than the others, whom she does not in the least resemble.



She is handsome, dignified, perhaps even severe.

No, they cannot be sisters; and yet that *distingué* looking old gentleman standing behind them, and making so much use of his glasses, is evidently the father of the eldest. She and he have the same regular features, and— Ah! this is the vision of Margherita, appearing in obedience to the summons of Mephisto.

The *prima-donna* is young, quite young, but she is not beautiful, and the golden plaits which stage tradition demands are not her own.

Her youth is in her favour, and she may have a voice, and she may be able to act . . . .

Ah! this is the scene of the Kermesse; how bright, how animated. What life there is in the music!

Now, we shall see.

They do see, all of them, their eyes and their glasses are all turned upon the modest Margherita as she tranquilly advances.

Presently they hear also . . . . only a few notes,



but they are pure, melodious, thrilling, and true; and having sung them, Margherita moves with quiet grace and dignity, and her face, which did not prepossess at the first glance, becomes attractive as its animation returns. Hilda's beauty is not of feature, but of expression. So far so good, comments the audience.

There may be something more in this *débutante* after all, than previous experiences have warranted one's anticipating.

The third act is over, and with it the Garden scene, the singer's test *par excellence*, the crowning ordeal in which "Margherita" can make or mar her future career.

The singer has assured all who hear her that the path which lies straight before her, ready and inviting, will lead on to—Fame.

Lord Goselyngge comes to her in tremendous excitement. He stammers, he is flushed and incoherent, while she is pale, self-contained, and calm.

"You are an angel!" he cries enraptured.



"I am so thankful you are content," she answers, smiling, and quietly withdraws the hand he has seized and covered with kisses.

She accepts his homage tranquilly, gratefully.

It is but his tribute to the successful *débutante*. It has nothing whatever to do with her individually; with the Hilda who is panting for a cordial shake of the hand, for a sympathetic smile, for a word of praise and encouragement, such as her father would give her, or Estella or—St. Helier.

Where is St. Helier?

Estella and she have speculated much on his unaccountable absence.

They have neither of them seen him since that morning on which he had so angrily left Hilda with Mr. Latimer.

She has written to tell him of her intended *début*, but has received no reply.

Even if he is away on circuit, as Jonathan wisely suggested in reply to Estella's anxious enquiries, he would surely see the daily papers; and if so, he



must have known about the Signorina's first appearance, for it has been announced and commented on *ad libitum*.

Estella, the admired girl in the stage-box, with shining eyes and sprays of lilies-of-the-valley in her dark hair, has at this moment perceived St. Helier as he entered the box opposite, in which the Countess Dowager of Dewminster and the Honourable Benjamin have been seated since the beginning of the performance.

St. Helier has not been with them before; Estella is quite sure of that.

Now that he has made his appearance, will he come over to shake hands with her sisters and herself?

As yet he has not even noticed their presence; he has not once looked their way.

"Isn't he provoking? he turns his glasses in every direction but ours," Estella impatiently whispered to Nettie.

"He knows we are here, and that is why he



avoids looking this way," answers Nettie, *sotto voce*. "There has been something between father and him which we know nothing about. I noticed his vexed look just now when he caught sight of father. I believe he has only come up on to a level with us so that he might see who was at the back of our box. I saw *him* as soon as we came in; he was in the stalls then, there, in that vacant one just below us, at the end of the second row.

"Oh! why did you not tell me before?" said Estella reproachfully.

"Because it would not have been fair to Hilda to give you a reason for dividing your attention, which was wholly due to her to-night, surely.

"And though I can hang my head, and look down over the front of the box, being privileged as the Baby of the family, such conduct would have been very unbecoming on the part of Miss Estella, you know."

Estella said nothing. She felt the Baby was right.

Mrs. Vivian, Mr. Latimer, and Ronald were also



occupying a box opposite to the Normans, and on the grand tier.

Theodosia was sulking at home all alone, Jonathan told the girls, but he pointed out Mrs. Braun, seated by the side of Miss Miller, a Grenfellian neighbour, in the stalls below. Miss Trevor, with her weary pale face, was there also, alone.

Mrs. Ashe could not sit in the front of the house with her veil down, although she might wear it over her bonnet and face at rehearsal.

Nettie tried to induce Jonathan to go over to Mrs. Vivian's box between the acts and ask Ronald to come back with him.

But Jonathan was not quite so ready now to come and go at Nettie's capricious bidding, and point-blank refused to obey her on this occasion; and Mary, ever anxious to spare the poor boy, declared their box was sufficiently crowded already.

On this Nettie deliberately turned her back on both Mary and Jonathan, and devoted herself entirely to Estella, with whom she exchanged many whispered confidences.



Meanwhile Mr. Norman, who detested "howling performances," as he most irreverently styled the opera, feeling even more bored by the lengthy pauses between the acts than by the music itself, made his way to Mrs. Vivian's box, where he hoped to refresh himself by a quiet business chat with Mr. Latimer.

"Won't you go over and see my daughters, Mr. Vivian?" suggested Mr. Norman as he shook hands with Ronald whose chair he desired to occupy.

How enthusiastically Nettie would have thanked her father had she been aware of the service he was all unconsciously rendering her!

As it was, all her gratitude for Ronald's appearance so soon after her expressed desire to see him, was lavished on that young man himself, who, as the Baby, furiously blushing, whispered to Estella, "must have *felt* that she was longing to speak to him."

The lead of the conversation was certainly undertaken by Nettie, and right willingly too.

Ronald, who felt that the crisis of his fate was



now at hand, was too preoccupied to take any active share in the girls' eager conversation.

They, however, had so many remarks to make to him, so many questions for him to answer, that his abstraction was unheeded.

Their praise of and delight with the *débutante* was unanimous, and even quiet Mary unconsciously elevated her voice as she volunteered her meed of praise to the fascinating actress.

They were all thoroughly acquainted with Hilda's vocal excellence; but even her most intimate friends were amazed by her evident grasp of the histrionic part of the art to which she was earnestly devoting herself.

Both Mary and Estella, who knew the text, were moved to something very like lachrymation as Hilda with thrilling pathos told Margherita's simple history, commencing with the words:—

“E che! sempre sola! Al campo è il fratel,—la madre perdei.”

This lovable sad-eyed girl *was* Margherita. Born to love, and, consequently, to suffer.



*Hilda* no longer existed for those who watched this realistic impersonation, but they saw and heard and felt the actual presence of that ideal Margherita for whom Gounod has composed some of his tenderest and most pathetic harmonies.

Margherita's music may not be classic, but it is human, and, therefore, it must appeal to humanity.

Since the *finale* of the Garden scene, *Hilda* had possessed the sympathies of her audience; this she felt instinctively as the true artist ever does, and, therefore, she was now doubly and trebly encouraged by their marked approval.

Even in the wearying sadness of the weird church scene, *Hilda's* genius lifted her above the grovelling tradition which appears to compel most actresses to crawl or plunge and wriggle along the floor, as though in emulation of the very badly used proverbial worm.

*Hilda* was not a down-trodden creature; she was a suffering woman, sad, ashamed, pitiful, pathetically appealing, but a true woman still; and not one present in all that numerous audience could have



resisted the eloquent misery which shone in her great sorrowful eyes, which rang with heartrending pathos in the now saddened tones of her beautiful thrilling voice.

The part of Siebel was taken by a most accomplished singer and actress, one of those ornaments of the lyric stage whose voice is usually compared to that of a blackbird, so naturally full and sweet and mellow is it, while her appearance must ever gladden the eyes of those who admire a handsome and graceful woman. Faust on this occasion was sung by an aspiring young tenor whose chief characteristic was, unfortunately, the painful attenuation of his limbs; but Mephistopheles had an excellent representative in an artist who ranks with Mme. —, that most charming of Siebels.

The audience, however, cared very little for tenor, contralto, or baritone on this occasion.

Margherita had not only been a *Prima Donna*, but the first in every respect; and Margherita's repeated bows and recalls seemed but to inspire a constant repetition of the bravas and bravissimas which sounded and resounded with redoubled ardour



whenever a fresh bouquet fell at the Signorina's feet. . . . .

Hilda Santarelli's *début* was now synonymous with Hilda Santarelli's triumph!



## CHAPTER XIV.

## FEEBLE CONSPIRATORS.

FOUR supper-parties had been organised with a view to fêting the Signorina on the night of her *début*.

Mrs. Vivian had sent a polite letter of invitation a week before the event, requesting the pleasure of Hilda's company if her exertions should not have too greatly fatigued her.

And after the brilliant success of the Garden scene, a far more urgent invitation from the Shoddy-Princess was brought to the Signorina's dressing-room; a pencilled note of extravagant congratulation and vehement entreaty for the honour of her presence at a little supper at No. 20, where only her most intimate friends would be present, and she, therefore, would be quite *sans gêne*. There was a PS. to this note, scrawled in Mr. Latimer's large bold hand.



“Pray do not let us vainly await the crowning joy of the evening—your presence in our midst,—and our chance of personally congratulating you on your triumph.”

The Countess Dowager more than ever *éprise* by the talented Signorina, since her success was assured, also supplemented her previous invitation by a note imploring Hilda's presence at No. 1. “Only Addie and Ben, Estella Norman, and Mr. St. Helier to meet you, so you won't have to put on company manners.” Thus the Countess wrote in her box at the Opera.

Hilda had seen St. Helier in the Dowager's box, and when she read the Countess' note and knew she would have the chance of spending the evening in *his* presence, she wavered—for a second.

She had not seen him since he left her in anger more than a week ago now, and she longed at least to know that there was perfect peace between them again.

The Norman girls had also, and most cordially, asked her to go home and sup with them. They



did not wait until her triumph was assured; indeed, they would but have repeated their urgent invitation far more eagerly if she had been depressed by failure, and in such case it is more than probable that Hilda would have gone to them for consolation and peace.

But now she needed no encouragement; and it occurred to her that she would be fulfilling a *duty* if she appeared at the grand supper given by Lord Goselyngge to the professionals, and at which she had been asked in courtesy to her rank as Prima-Donna, to play the part of hostess.

But at the end of the Opera the Signorina realised that, for this evening at least, she had done *duty* enough, and that she surely might be spared from making any further efforts for the sake of pleasing either Lord Goselyngge, the public generally, or that most officious and irrepressible *factotum* the Anglo-Italian, Giacomo Arrowsmith.

Her success was now assured; it was a matter for congratulation only, which admitted of neither doubt nor misgiving.



Utterly weary, though by no means depressed, Hilda resolved to decline all the inducements so alluringly offered to her for the prolongation of the evening.

She avowed that she longed to be alone, and desired to rest in peace for this night, and as she impartially declined all the invitations given her, on the same plea, no one could possibly be offended.

To one and all she answered, "Excuse me to-night, but come and see me to-morrow."

She was, nevertheless, considerably surprised to hear that Mr. Ronald Vivian and Mr. Jonathan Curtis were waiting to see her at half-past ten o'clock on the following morning.

For Ronald Vivian's visit immediately after her *début* she was, of course, in some measure prepared, and she had very decisively resolved on the final answer she would now be compelled to make to his repeated proposals.

But Jonathan Curtis! This was, indeed, an unexpected pleasure! Ah! perhaps he came with some message from his friends the Norman girls, or, more



likely still, from Mr. Peregrine Latimer, whose very marked attention, by-the-by, Hilda was most desirous of suppressing to some extent. . . . . She hated men to presume! Such were the thoughts in the Signorina's mind as she entered the drawing-room, in which the two young men were anxiously, or, to be accurate, nervously awaiting her.

No greater contrast could possibly be imagined than that presented to Hilda's calm, dispassionate glance by the appearance of her unexpected visitors.

Jonathan, tall, loose, ungainly, his greenish eyes shifting as uneasily as did the weight of his body from one large foot to the other, his auburn hair looking undeniably red in the uncompromising light of the morning; and his freckled skin so moist, in consequence of the heat and his mental perturbation, that it necessitated the constant application of a crimson handkerchief, which the ill-advised youth, in his love for bright colours, had specially selected, as likely to tone down the too vivid tints of his complexion and hair.

Thus, as regarded the outward man, poor Johnny appeared to the Signorina; but she, keenly sensitive



for others as well as herself, was perfectly aware that beneath that ungainly exterior sterling qualities were hidden, and that a kinder and a more thoroughly unselfish heart than poor old much-abused Johnny Pry's, seldom beat in a manly bosom.

The Norman girls had most impartially informed Hilda of Johnny's virtues as well as of his superficial faults.

Mary had praised him in her reticent, but all the more impressive, fashion. Nettie had alternately laughed at and abused him, but always ended by owning that "there really never was a better fellow." Estella had confided the unavowed secret of Jonathan's absorbing affection for the Baby, and had laughed with Hilda at this romantic passion on the part of one who, to judge by appearances, was the most prosaic of individuals.

At Mrs. Braun's, Hilda, in her quietly observant fashion, had noted and been considerably impressed by the hero-worship so lavishly bestowed on Peregrine Latimer by this really modest and very timid young man.



What errand could possibly have brought him to her room this morning, and in the company of a youth to whose undeniable grace, refinement, and beauty, poor Johnny's every look and movement served as so many foils?

Adonis and a satyr was Hilda's inward comment on the contrast presented to her outward vision.

Ronald's classical features certainly seemed cast in the mould of ideal sculpture, and were finely chiselled withal; whereas Johnny had no features of any kind, deserving the name.

And yet they were "good men and true," both of them, kind, helpful, generous to a fault,—to what would appear as faulty in the eyes of the world, that is, for they were ready to ignore their own interests where those of their dear ones happened to be at stake.

"I had hoped to come to you upon a very different mission, Signorina, now that your *début* is a *fait accompli*," Ronald said, speaking with a certain effort after the embarrassing silence which had fol-



lowed the first commonplace greeting of these three, so oddly brought together.

Hilda looked straight into the speaker's troubled eyes, and gave a little sigh; the sigh was inaudible, but Jonathan, who was observant in his way, noticed a quick look, a look of relief pass over the Signorina's face.

Of the different mission to which Ronald alluded, Curtis knew nothing; and it was characteristic of the man that even in the midst of his present anxiety and preoccupation, he mentally resolved to try and find out for himself what that secret business of Ronald's might be.

\* \* \* \* \*

The three were seated by this time, and a fresh feeling of wonder came into Hilda's mind, as to the mysterious errand which had brought these men into her presence, and now held them silent, spell-bound as it were.

"I hope your mission is not a very unpleasant one?" she said, trying to smile, but herself becoming nervous under the depressing influence of this inexplicable hesitation and subsequent silence.



"We really ought first of all to apologise to the Signorina for troubling her in this matter at all," said Jonathan, suddenly bracing himself for the effort of explanatory speech, which evidently had already proved too trying for his companion.

"Pray do nothing of the kind," said Hilda eagerly. "I begin to fear there must be something wrong; that a trouble threatens some mutual friend of ours?"

"Pray let me know the truth, and as quick as you can."

She had risen, moved by her anxiety, and extended her hands in the eagerness of supplication; for she now felt convinced that trouble of some kind brought these ambassadors to her.

"If in any way I can be of service," she continued appealingly, "I pray you will at once command me, without any such thought, as ceremony or apologation."

Hilda's English was not perfect; but no fault could be found with her womanly tact, and her ready desire to help wherever help might be required of her.



"We determined to come to a lady for advice in this painful matter," resumed Jonathan, his courage rising with the inspiriting sound of his own voice, "and I proposed laying the case before Miss Mary Norman; but Mr. Vivian, very justly, I am sure, considered that you, Signorina, being quite neutral would the more readily give us your impartial opinion. It is just possible that with Mary Norman some personal feeling might enter into her view of the subject."

"For my own part I was fully determined," cried Ronald hastily, "that you yourself must be guarded against the machinations of one, whom we now cannot regard as other than a base impostor, and into whose hands we fear you have already given considerable power as regards your future."

Ronald's eyes flashed with anger, and his next words were spoken with an amount of decision which startled while it alarmed the Signorina.

"We have come to warn you against Peregrine Latimer," he said, "who is playing a very treacherous game—"



"We only surmise that such is the case," Jonathan interrupted nervously. His voice and his lips both trembled as he volunteered his mild protest, and he really looked as disconsolate as if he himself had been discovered in some nefarious transaction.

"What has he done?" cried Hilda, flushing in a manner quite unusual to her.

"Have you given him any money, Signorina?" asked Ronald quickly; "this is no time for mincing matters; pray tell me the truth at once."

"I have only given him one hundred pounds," said Hilda, stammering and evidently much discomfited by this unprecedented cross-examination into her private affairs.

"He told me that was the usual fee on the occasion of the signing of so profitable an agreement as mine certainly is, thanks chiefly to *his* great consideration on my behalf; of that I am quite sure; and, indeed, indeed, I believe, I hope, you must be mistaken, gentlemen, in thinking bad things of so kind and so clever a man."

Jonathan groaned aloud, by way of proving his earnest participation in her evident anxiety.



"You are sure you have given Peregrine Latimer *nothing* but that one hundred pounds?" resumed Ronald, too stern in his pursuit of justice to heed any plea for mercy at this moment.

He confronted Hilda with such earnest, truth-compelling eyes, that hers sank beneath the searching enquiry of his direct gaze.

Both he and she had for the moment forgotten that he was really only her very humble adorer.

She now regarded him rather as an unwilling witness might, who is inclined to resent and resist the too pertinacious enquiries of persistent counsel; or of a too officious judge.

"You can assure us that you have given him nothing else?" continued Ronald breathlessly.

He was quite aware of her reluctance to meet his questioning glance; and he feared that this boded some harm to herself.

"I gave him a note, written by his dictation, and promising him one third of my earnings for the first three years; provided he succeeded in



making a further profitable arrangement for me with the Diamond Opera, as he expected to do."

The feeling of the unwilling witness became stronger in Hilda as she felt herself compelled to speak, and she looked at Ronald with something very like defiance in her eyes.

He had suppressed the fiery Italian oath which rose to his lips as he listened to her last explanation; but he now vented his concentrating wrath in the one emphatic word — "Scoundrel!" which he hissed out between his teeth.

"This villain has made overtures to my mother, has—has asked her to marry him," the young man continued, his indignation growing with the recital of Latimer's misdeeds.

"He has robbed her, robbed her of large sums of money, on the pretext of investing it in some fantastic scheme, which has no existence save in his own brain."

"This, Mr. Curtis, to whom I am deeply indebted, has already ascertained for me."

Ronald, who was courtesy personified, bowed



very deferentially to Jonathan as he expressed his gratitude to that gentleman, to whom he now said:—

“You will, I am sure, best convince the Signorina, by telling her exactly how and what further villanies of Mr. Latimer’s you discovered last night.”

Jonathan literally shivered as he thus heard himself called upon to bear testimony to the guilt of a man whom he but very lately had so keenly delighted to honour.

“I pray you will believe, Signorina,” he stammered, quite breathless in his confusion, “that my discovery of Mr. Latimer’s un—un—trustworthiness was not the result of my own seeking, but was forced upon me in consequence of certain rigorous enquiries Mary Norman had commanded me to make in the city.”

“She is a very shrewd girl, and has wonderful sense, as you no doubt have discovered ere this, and she had some reasons of her own for suspecting Mr. Latimer.



“Added to these secret misgivings on her part, came the well-grounded fear that Mr. Norman might be induced to invest money in this great Anti-Bee——”

“Swindle,” interpolated Ronald, as the other hesitated in his vain search for an appropriate and yet not too condemnatory word.

“Urged by Miss Norman, and feeling it to be my duty to protect my honoured chief and his family, as far as lay in my power,” continued Jonathan, losing his sense of compassion for the new friend, in the warm declaration of his zeal on behalf of the older ones, “I entered into this affair with a pertinacity of which I am half ashamed——”

“Of which you have every reason to be most proud,” Ronald fiercely corrected him.

“And I am indeed deeply grieved to be obliged to confess,” Jonathan continued in a lower tone, “that my research into the origin and progress of this suddenly so much vaunted enterprise, has been most disheartening in every respect.

“I employed a broker to represent me, being very desirous to avoid all contact with the principals



in the Anti-Bee scheme; and my employé and I together succeeded first of all in discovering that Mr. Perigrine Latimer in his own person represented the entire and oft-quoted committee, and also that letters purporting to come from one Sir Fulsome Venture were in reality conceived and penned by Mr. Latimer himself."

These condemnatory details were in themselves not very intelligible to Hilda, but their very serious nature was thoroughly conveyed to her by poor Jonathan's miserable looks, the painful hesitation of his speech, and the glowering anger in Ronald's frowning face.

"And you discovered something of all this only last night, Mr. Curtis?" she asked, hoping to escape further commercial explanations, which she was quite unable to understand.

"Pray, tell your story to the Signorina, just as you told it to me," suggested Ronald, "that is how she will follow you best."

"I had been rather distressed yesterday evening," Johnny commenced apologetically, "at having to



leave poor Miss Braun at home alone while we, all of us, were looking forward to the wonderful treat you were to give us, Signorina. For this I am sure you will pardon my thanking you now at once, in my own name, as well as on the part of all who had the happiness of hearing you."

Hilda had never before so thoroughly appreciated those excellent qualities of Jonathan's, on which Mary was wont to dilate, as she did at this moment.

He is *gauche*, but he certainly has much discrimination, the gratified *débutante* admitted to herself. And who can blame her for making this discovery at a moment when Johnny's perspicacity was so plainly proved by his admiration for herself?

Hilda was a true artist, and she was also a true woman.

"So Miss Braun did not come to the Opera at all?" she asked after a momentary and reflective pause.

She would have wished by her undoubted success to have impressed even cavilling, ill-tempered



Theodosia. Indeed, a word of congratulation from that jealous spinster, however reluctantly uttered, would have counted far more with Hilda now, than the fulsome praises of her confessed admirers.

Such was the change which the triumph of one night had already worked in the modest unsophisticated girlish nature.

Yesterday she thought but of that golden treasure, her voice; to-day she already desired personal homage.

"The Normans were asking about Miss Theodosia," Jonathan resumed, when Hilda looked towards him again, as if desirous that he should continue. "And as their box was rather crowded at that moment, and the Church scene was just over, I could not help thinking how sad it was that while Mrs. Braun and—and Mr. Latimer, and we all of us were so enjoying ourselves, that poor Miss Dosie should be moping at home all alone.

"So I asked Mary Norman's leave, and resolved to cut away to the Gardens in a hansom and to bring Miss Dosie back with me, will she nil she."



(Jonathan, in the remembrance of his late ardour, began to improvise *ad lib.*, himself, even while he was endeavouring to convince his hearers of the immovable strength of his inflexible purpose. I wished her to see the last scenes, to judge for herself, and then to return home with her mother.

“My programme, you see, was very clearly defined,” Jonathan continued, rising from his chair so as to be better able to “tread out” the measure of his increasing embarrassment on alternate feet, “but the chief actor, or actress, begging Miss Braun’s pardon, was not quite up to the part proposed for her. I let myself into the house, searched all the sitting-rooms for Miss Dosie, actually intended to tap at the door of her own room, but found it wide open” . . . .

“And to cut a long story painfully short,” interrupted Ronald, with less courtesy and far more impatience than he could have accounted for to himself, “Mr. Curtis found the unfortunate lady in Mr. Peregrine Latimer’s study, whither she had retired with her passionate griefs, her frantic jealousy, and her despairing love. Desirous of keeping within



the shrine of *her* idol, even while *he* was bowing the knee to another saint, Miss Theodosia had laid her head upon his writing-desk, and was sobbing her poor old heart out in all the bitter anguish of unrequited affection."

Ronald laughed aloud as he completed this dramatic description of the unfortunate spinster's sufferings, to which he had alluded in a tone of the most withering contempt.

Hilda always eager in defending the absent, and most especially the weaker side, now vehemently protested on Theodosia's behalf.

"Poor lady, poor lady; it is my firm conviction she really loves that man, the man you now think so bad. And a woman will do and dare or suffer anything, everything, rather than believe ill of the man whom she loves."

"Hilda!" cried Ronald, unmindful of his business errand, of Jonathan's presence, and of all but his own strong, smouldering passion, kindled into sudden flame, as it was, by the bright sympathetic light in the eyes of his adored one. "Hilda, that



is love; you know it now; you have learnt to feel it yourself, and it is—oh! glorious angelic Hilda, tell me it is—that love you feel for—me.”

He threw himself on the ground at her feet, and strove to possess himself of her reluctant hands.

“And can it be possible that you are so suffering still?” she exclaimed, moving a step away from him, and herself for the moment oblivious of the presence of Jonathan, who was doing his utmost to disappear between the blind and the open window.

“I have waited so long, so patiently; I have striven to make no sign all these long, weary months, Hilda,” Ronald resumed, his eager protestations changing to a pitiful tone of pleading entreaty; “but now the allotted time is over. You have made your *début*, and I have a right,—yes, a *right* to receive my answer. Hilda, noble, beautiful, generous Hilda, give me my reward—answer me—at last.”

“I have not even heard the end of Mr. Curtis’ adventures yet,” said Hilda, far more relieved than



annoyed to hear Jonathan's warning cough, the only means in his power to assert his presence and save himself from any further participation in this utterly unexpected and most romantic *dénouement* of a scene which had commenced in so very prosaic a fashion.

"I will write you a letter and tell you all in that, Ronald," said Hilda to her discomfited adorer, whose present mortification was as thorough as had been the previous *élan* which had carried him quite beyond the reach of his matter-of-fact surroundings.

For a few blissful moments he had realised Hilda's gracious presence and the possible attainment of his heart's desire only; now came the dire reaction, and with it the cruel conviction that he had made a fool of himself, and pleaded his cause in the uncompromising presence of one "Johnny Pry."

But Johnny Pry on this occasion acted with an amount of delicacy and discretion which Mary, alone of all his friends, would have considered him capable of.



He appeared to be quite unaware of the compromising nature of Ronald's late passionate avowals, and too much absorbed in his own relation of Theodosia's troubles, to have paid any attention to those of the unhappy lover who now sat with averted face, silent and mortified, though not without a gleam of hope in his mind as he thought of the letter she had volunteered to write to him, the letter in which she had said she would tell him *all*. That comprehensive *all* and the smile with which it had been spoken, being quite enough to encourage hopes which were ready to spring up revived at the faintest glimmer of sunshine.

"I will not trouble you with the details of my prolonged interview with poor Miss Braun," said Jonathan, addressing himself to Hilda, "nor need I tell you how she was at last induced to confide her painful secrets to me. First of all, she was very, very angry to hear that Mr. Latimer was with Mrs. Vivian; and then I think it was her jealous indignation which led her on to the confession of her love for and her clandestine engagement to—Peregrine.



“Anxious, perhaps suspicious, as I was already, it was only natural that I should at once strive to ascertain if Miss Braun had been induced to enter into any speculation of her lover’s. And I then discovered that she had already made over a considerable part of her private fortune to her intended husband.

“It still seems like a horrid nightmare to me,” said Jonathan parenthetically, and with a groan he added, “the terrible part of it is, that there now seems to be no chance of awaking from it.”

“Did you tell Miss Braun of your suspicions?” asked Hilda, regarding the question entirely from a feminine point of view, “and could you make her doubt the good faith of her beloved?”

“No,” said Jonathan, “nor did I seek to do so. The poor lady was suffering so acutely already by reason of her jealous fears, that I was determined not needlessly to add to her anxieties by raising doubts of another kind in her mind, until circumstances should compel us to take some decisive action *à propos* of this—”



“Scoundrel!” cried Ronald fiercely, and rose as he spoke; “what possible hesitation can you pretend to have, Curtis, in calling this impostor by the name he deserves?”

“The first notion *I* had of all this villany,” Ronald continued, evidently glad of any excuse for giving a vent to his pent-up feelings in passionate speech, “was last night, when I very naturally resented what appeared to me as most unwarrantable familiarity on that brute’s part. I caught him kissing my mother’s hand, not as an act of homage, that might have been pardonable, but like a lover—ugh!”

“His subsequent insolence led to some sharp retorts on my part, and then by degrees I induced my unhappy and most deluded parent to confess to me the nature of the trap this designing villain had so craftily laid for her. Curtis had already whispered a word of warning to me during the evening, and so I at once determined, regardless of the lateness of the hour, to go round to number 39, and inform him of my appalling discovery.

“But every one in the Gardens has known and



discussed Mrs. Vivian's engagement throughout this past week." Hilda interposed, and turning towards Ronald, asked, "How was it possible that you knew nothing about it?"

"I never went into the Gardens except to get the chance of a word with you, Signorina," Ronald admitted pathetically, and Jonathan vaguely wondered if Vivian had mistaken Nettie for Hilda, on the occasion of their very earnest conversation together.

"It seems that the persons to whom certain news is most important are always the last to hear of it," said Hilda, rather at a loss as to what it behoved her to do or to say next.

Jonathan again came to the rescue.

"We have told you all this, Signorina, in the first place to warn you against having any further dealings with Latimer, and also to ask if you, who are far more intimate with Mr. St. Helier than either of us, will kindly consent to tell him the facts of the case, and ask him for his advice as to the next step, the first legal step, which must of course be taken in this matter now. We naturally desire to



try and regain some portion at least of the money which these two confiding ladies have handed over to the Anti-Bee Company."

"Robbery," quoth Ronald curtly.

"And at the same time we feel it is most desirable to keep Latimer without the faintest suspicion of our having made such discoveries at all," continued Jonathan impressively, "and we would therefore beg of you, if he should call upon you, Signorina, as he most probably will do to-day, to show him no change of manner when you receive him."

"For that I am actress enough, you can so far rely on me," said Hilda.

"But about Mr. St. Helier?"

"He will surely be only too thankful if he can be the means of rescuing you from the talons of this impostor," cried Ronald warmly; "and you can learn his opinion as a friend, whereas we men should have to go to him officially, and that would complicate matters at the outset, and also necessitate our dragging in the names of the injured ladies, from whom we have as yet not even



received permission to take any action whatever in the matter."

As Hilda listened to the alternate feeble pleading and excuses of her visitors, she could not refrain from a mental comment on their utter helplessness, and on their evident incapacity to cope with the extensive experience of the astute Latimer.

"Well, they were only boys after all," she thought, and a longing possessed her to hear St. Helier's opinion on this miserable business. How refreshing his clear decisive speech would be, after all the aimless twaddle to which she had been compelled to listen for the last two interminable hours.

"I will consult Mr. St. Helier and at once," she said, rising to show her visitors that she desired this prolonged interview to end—at last.

"As for the ladies in question, I would strongly advise you to give them no hint whatever of your intended prosecution, for in their present disposition you may be sure that they would resent your desire to help them, and would regard any interference as most unpardonable, quite *trop de zèle*, in fact."



With this remarkably shrewd inference, the Signorina shook hands with her visitors, whose long delayed departure she could not but hail with a feeling of intense relief.



## CHAPTER XV.

## THE PLOT IN ST. HELIER'S LIFE.

ALTHOUGH the Countess Dowager, yielding to her dear "infatuated" Benjamin's earnest entreaties, had written down Estella Norman's name as one of the guests to be asked to meet the *débutante* after the opera was over, it so happened that the hurried note of invitation never reached Estella's hands, for the very sufficient reason that it still lay in Mr. Latimer's pocket-book, in which it had been placed with another letter for personal delivery, and completely forgotten afterwards.

The fact was that Mr. Latimer's extended "operations" in the city left him very little leisure to bestow on any of the minor commissions with which his lady clients were wont to charge him.

Poor Estella little guessed, as she so wistfully, so longingly glanced across at the dowager's box at the



Opera, in which Mr. St. Helier had taken up his position, that there had been a chance of her meeting the truant barrister at supper later in the evening.

As it was, she returned home with her father and sisters contentedly enough.

Hilda's success had delighted all her friends, and filled Estella with unfeigned exultation, which feeling was by no means diminished by the fact that Hilda had sent her a pencilled note in which she explained that she could accept *none* of the invitations to supper which her friends had so kindly given her.

So Hilda and St. Helier would not meet to-night, while the bright light of her new triumph was casting such a bewildering radiance about the fortunate prima-donna.

And therefore Estella went home quite contented. At peace with the world and herself. Thankful above all things for the knowledge that *he* was now in London.

"You surely can't be wanting to go to Mrs.



Toegoode's *again*, Stella?" exclaimed Nettie next morning with a very disapproving look and tone.

Estella certainly had profited to the utmost by Adela-ida's general invitation, and had wandered off to No. 3 for a consultation, which both of them really enjoyed, at least three mornings in every week.

In one sense her intentions in thus leaving home had been lamentably frustrated; for St. Helier, who of course was the load-star that tempted her to take these solitary matutinal rambles, was striving hard to forget both her and that other perplexing enigma in a distant county, where he devoted all his time to the closest possible study of his briefs.

"That St. Helier is pushing his way to the front pretty considerably," one of the legal fraternity remarked to another.

"Yes, by Jove!" answered the other, "there's no depending on the quiet fellows in these days; you think you're safe and that they're a deal too lazy ever to take the trouble to interfere with you in the least, when lo and behold! one fine morning they



burst forth quite alarmingly in a perfect torrent of eloquence."

"This fellow has sound practical sense, and understands arguing a case too; that goes farther than your puff oratory by a very long way. I mean to give him a couple of briefs when we're all back in town again;" so Mr. Grey, the eminent solicitor, declared.

"Still waters run deep," commented the other, himself making a note of St. Helier's successful pleadings in his memorandum-book.

Now, St. Helier was in town again, and therefore it became imperatively necessary to Estella to go and see Mrs. Toegoode the very morning after Hilda's *début* at the Opera.

Nettie objected, and even remonstrated with her literary sister on this occasion.

"It's stupid of you always to be running off to Mrs. Toegoode's," she said. "We never get a quiet morning's work and chat together now."

"There's Mary sent for by Mrs. Vivian; *they've* evidently got some secret understanding, and there



are you going to talk business with Adela-ida. What does it all mean, Stella? I don't believe you talk any business at all; and what's more to the point, I am quite sure your novel never came to such a complete stand-still as since you went to the Countess's party. I have never even set eyes on the dear old manuscript since that night, and, the other day when you were round at Hilda's, I went up into the den and groped and burrowed everywhere, but could not find a single chapter. Have you left it all at Mrs. Toegoode's this long, long while?"

"I am going to fetch it back now, at once," said Estella, rising and congratulating herself on having thus evaded the telling of a direct lie, an ordeal from which, in spite of her lately complicated experiences, the girl still shrank with a strangely unfeminine horror.

"And if I promise to copy out that barcarole accompaniment for you, while you're away, you'll read me all the new bits in Gwendolen when you come back, won't you, Stella?" Nettie pleaded, looking very wistfully into her sister's eyes.

"If I have a satisfactory interview," said Estella,



unable to meet the Baby's appealing glance, and speaking very slowly. "If I have a satisfactory interview, I'll do whatever you may be pleased to command when I come home again."

Though really unwilling to tell a lie, Estella had quite a feminine pleasure in exerting her ingenuity by walking as far as she dared trust herself upon that slippery and most delusive plank, yclept "prevarication."

There was no welcoming blaze of sunlight to dazzle her, as she stepped out into the Gardens this morning.

The air was heavy, oppressive, and the lowering grey sky seemed to presage a coming storm.

Estella's heart was heavy too, as she slowly made her way towards the old oak, whose whispering leaves seemed to be telling one another some very mysterious story.

Would he come this morning? and would he bring her back her manuscript?

It was very wrong of him to have left her without it all this time. What Nettie had said was



quite true; since the night of the Dowager's party, or rather (and this date Nettie did not know) since the following morning, her novel had been shamefully neglected and now she really must get it back, if only to prove to Adela-ida and to her own people that she could and would complete the task she had once set herself.

"I feel almost afraid to ask even for your gracious pardon, Miss Estella," said St. Helier, who had entered by the grove gate, just as the girl approached the oak-tree. "I fear you have, and alas! with apparent reason, been seriously displeased with me?"

"Because you retained my book while you were out of town?" she asked, that sad heavy feeling at her heart giving place to a sudden and most inexplicable gladness.

Was it the mere fact of his presence which caused her this happiness, or was it that subtle tenderness in his eyes and in his voice which she so infinitely preferred to his ordinary cool and cynical manner.



"You knew, at least, that I was away?" he said, evidently relieved.

"Jonathan told us you were most likely away on circuit," she said; "and as the Signorina had heard nothing of you, and I had not seen you, I—"

"Had you looked for me then?" he resumed eagerly.

"I came out almost every morning," said she, "because I was quite at a loss without *that*," she pointed to the roll of paper which he held in his hand.

"My talisman!" he said smiling, and evidently very well pleased with the turn the conversation was taking. "I felt I should wield quite a mighty sceptre as regarded your destinies, Miss Estella, if only I could contrive to retain possession of your much cherished manuscript."

"Don't you think you were taking rather a mean advantage?" she asked, longing yet dreading to meet his eyes.

"I was about to quote a proverb in self-defence,"



he resumed, "but perhaps you would not approve, and I really am quite unable to risk your displeasure again."

"I don't think it has ever fallen upon you as yet," she said smiling, "and I do wish to know by what proverb you intended to vindicate yourself."

"All's fair in love and war," said he.

"Is there to be war between us then?" she asked, feeling that some effort at speech was incumbent upon her, yet scarcely knowing what words she could use that would not betray the growing agitation of her thoughts.

"No, not war; God forbid!" he cried, "but oh! Estella, let there be *love*."

She sat quite silent for awhile, but when he laid his hand on her's, she clasped it closely, clingingly, conveying a perfect assurance by the lingering caress of her shapely fingers.

What need was there for immediate speech, when they so thoroughly understood one another?

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"I was naughty the other day, the last time we sat here together," she said, after a long, a very long, but a most satisfactory silence.

"I was distressed about my book, and I did not think you were quite pleased with it, or with me, and I fear I was very ungracious about the sketch you had so kindly written out for me. But I will promise to use it now, and I will——"

"And *we* will," substituted St. Helier, with a smile that made her glow with its warm light.

"And *we* will work it out together, and make a *real* novel of it after all," she assented, gently clapping her hands in a delight, the exuberance of which demanded some outward sign.

He suddenly caught both those demonstrative little hands again now, and held them in that firm possessive grasp which almost made her wince with pain, and yet, by its calm assertion of power, was so exceedingly reassuring, so strangely delightful.

"When you are my wife, Stella, I must tell you about the dark plot which clouded so many of my years, and made an old man of me before my time."



He pointed to his hair as he spoke, and Estella looked at those grey signs of the storm of life, which had struck her as incongruous when first she noticed them there.

"I should like to hear the story of your life here, now, at once," said she pleadingly, "and as it is the first favour I have dared to ask of you, I think you are bound to grant it."

He leant towards her, and said in so low, so tender a tone, that it filled her eyes with sudden and quite unaccountable tears, as certain strains of music will, sung in a thrilling minor key: "I can refuse you nothing now, my darling, but I shall want all my courage for this task, and you must inspire me first; say to me, tell me the story of your life, dear Everard, because I love you."

She repeated his words slowly, methodically, like a child anxious to say its lesson just as the master bids it.

"And now, my Stella, I want a bribe as well," he said, masterfully, but with the light of love in his eyes all the time,



She lowered the sunshade (where was the sun?), and thus sheltered, or rather hidden, she bent towards him, and gently touched his brow with her lips. But their sweet contact set his heart beating wildly, madly.

He jumped up, and grasping the parasol with one hand and her resisting arm with the other, he pressed his lips on her's with a passionate, lingering, delicious kiss, that left her almost frightened.

Pale, trembling, and quite breathless, "My darling, my darling!" he whispered, frightened himself at the sight of her suddenly white face, "forgive me, oh! forgive me. I love you; I have loved you so long, so long,—since the first hour in which we spoke together here; and I have been wilfully blind, blind towards your sweet maidenly affection; blind towards the *reality* of the attraction which you and you only possess for me."

Her pretty bright colour had all come back into her face again now, and she could even smile quite saucily, as she peeped out from under the fringe of the sunshade to reassure herself that they were still alone, unwatched, and unsuspected . . . .



"Give me your hand, child," he said, and when he held it, he looked into her sweet dark eyes and added, speaking most impressively, "first of all, I wish to tell you Stella, for my satisfaction as much as for yours, that since the long past days of my youth's one great and irretrievable folly, I have never kissed a woman's lips with love, with passion, as I could not resist kissing your's just now, when heaven seemed open to me once again, with a glorious promise of peace and perfect happiness. You believe me, don't you, dearest?"

Believe him? of course she did, entirely, implicitly, and just because she also felt their momentary happiness to be so perfect, she, a true daughter of Eve, insisted on learning something at once, which might bring a cloud upon their love-lit horizon.

"Tell me all about it now," she pleaded, "I want to know; it seems so impossible that you can ever have been so rash, so foolish as you would try to make me believe."

"I was just twenty-one," he said, feeling bound to comply with her request, but not at all relishing



the task he had undertaken with such a very good grace. "My book of poems, you remember, was just published, and I was in that state of *Schwärmerei* which is eminently characteristic of the youths who care not at all about physical training, but surfeit themselves with a mental diet, of which Heine forms the *pièce de résistance*.

"Poor Heine! yes, he was a *Schwärmer* too, in one sense, but then his biting cynicism kept the mental balance pretty correct. With me, perhaps because my health was not robust, sentimentality ran away with reason, prudence, and all the other qualities which are supposed to elevate mankind above the unthinking instinct-following level of the honest brute.

"I fell in love—to use the accepted form of speech, which in my case would be far more correctly stated by the admission that I saw a very pretty face, and caught a violent attack of the delirious fever, described as *love*."

"First love?" suggested Estella meekly. She was already smarting at this sudden contact with the unpleasant fact she had insisted on unveiling,



"She, the pretty woman, was considerably my senior," he continued, bent now on getting through this irksome task with all possible dispatch.

"She regarded my boyish adoration with charming tolerance; she caused me to quarrel with my family and to abandon my studies, and my first chance of distinguishing myself in my profession; such a chance as comes to a man but once in a lifetime, and then—she married me."

Estella started up from her seat now, and stood before him in silent terror.

"Child," he said, nervously catching at her hand. "What does it matter now? She bade me go through the ceremony of marriage with her—and I obeyed—as I should have followed her into the fire, had she asked me to do so."

"Oh!" moaned the poor fool-hardy little daughter of Eve, vainly wishing now that she had never sought to hear a word of all this.

"Is that pretty woman dead?" she asked; and that possibility seemed to bring back a faint gleam of light into the darkly lowering horizon so suddenly closing in about her.



"God knows!" said he.

"But she was your wife—don't *you* know?" cried Estella.

"No; she was not my wife," said he; "she had a husband living at that time."

"And you discovered this?" asked Estella, her interest growing with her boundless anxiety.

"Good Mrs. O'Neill, my mother's maid, did that for me," said he; "and so, 'I wandered through the world once more, light-hearted and content' . . . . No, Stella; until I began to know, began to love you, I have known neither peace nor hope, nor content—but now?"

"I will teach you all those good things, my dear," said she, simply, re-assuringly, "and we will write the story of your life together, and that will be a real novel, for I understand now that human lives have their plot too."

"Even though there has been neither poison, conspiracy, nor violent death in them?" he asked, smiling, since she smiled; happy, so happy, because he had made her so.



"You forget that we *can* make our case good with big—"

"How dare you!" he cried, as he stopped the word on her lips with a kiss.

A kiss which held two startled observers spell-bound on the gravel path.



## CHAPTER XVI.

## ESTELLA'S TRIUMPH.

"OH! Hilda," cried Estella, advancing to meet the new-comers, and bowing to Mrs. Ashe, who was the Signorina's companion.

"Oh! Hilda, dear friend, congratulate me now; for this is the hour of my triumph, and I am as happy in it as you were last night in yours."

Indeed the girl was happy, far too happy to be troubled with any sense of shame at being discovered in the embrace of her lover; far too happy to think it possible that the cause of her rejoicing might not gladden the hearts of all others.

Hilda took both her friend's hands, and kissed her on either cheek. "I wish you both all that is best in love and happiness," she said, and said it earnestly, striving with all the strength of her womanly nature to subdue the miserable revolt,



which had filled her mind with furious anger, when first she beheld her rival—(her rival?) what despicable folly—*his wife elect*—in St. Helier's arms.

"It is fortunate for me that I should happen to meet you here, Mr. St. Helier," she said, after having ceremoniously congratulated him, in his turn. "I was on my way to the Grove, to your house, now, being compelled to consult you on business matters which are of the greatest consequence to some of our mutual friends. Allow me to introduce Mrs. Ashe," she added, "who has kindly undertaken to chaperon me, and who says she can materially assist us in the difficult task we may have before us."

"Will you allow me, in my turn, to suggest that we all adjourn to my house?" said St. Helier, glancing from one to the other of the three ladies, and vaguely wondering at the extraordinary caprice which induced Mrs. Ashe to wear a black mask on a stifflingly hot July morning. But there was no accounting for the vagaries of women, he sagely concluded, and could not resist taking a surreptitious glance at the bright unveiled face of his darling, his fascinating Estella.



Yes, she was his now, and the foolish conflict in his restless mind was over; he could never waver in his allegiance again for a single treacherous moment. And she,—no—she was not one of the cruel capricious ones either, and she loved him; she had confessed it now, and she had kissed him.

“Are you all rehearsing a play here, good people?” exclaimed Mrs. Toegoode, who, accompanied by Nettie, had just entered the Gardens, and was now advancing eagerly towards the group under the oak tree.

“What do *you* mean by coming out in the day time like this, you most unhappy creature?” Adalida whispered to Mrs. Ashe, whose arm she seized in a grip that was almost vicious.

“She has come by my particular request, Mrs. Toegoode,” said Hilda, who, though not able to hear the other’s words, had guessed their uncivil import from her angry look and manner, and felt doubly indignant with the authoress, since she had succeeded in making Mrs. Ashe confess that that ambitious literary character was her own sister, al-



though ashamed to own the close relationship existing between them.

Hilda would prove to the unnatural sister, she thought, that others might still be proud and glad of poor Ada's company, in spite of her sad disfigurement.

There were two other sisters in that oddly assembled group, who also whispered to one another in hurried undertones.

"I went to Mrs. Toegoode's to fetch you, Stella," Nettie said, dismay and surprise both expressed in the long enquiring glance with which she turned to Estella.

"And I was here all the time; here, and with *him*," answered Estella, her eyes far more eloquent than her whispered words; for they met *his* at this moment.

He answered their welcome, though most unconscious appeal by instantly making his way to the Baby's side, whose small hand he clasped, as he said,

"We have your good wishes, dear sister Nettie, haven't we?"



"Oh! haven't you?" cried Nettie, whose joy was always of the irrepressible kind. She would dearly have liked to hug her new brother on the spot, so great was her sudden elation, but she very discreetly contented herself by fervently embracing Estella only, *pro tem*.

"We're evidently in for an afternoon-palaver, instead of the usual games," St. Helier said, smiling deprecatingly, as he beheld Mrs. Vivian and Mary Norman issuing from the gate of No. 20, and making their way directly towards the group of ladies, of which he, the only man present, quite unconsciously formed the centre.

"What can have brought such a busy crowd of you out here, scandalizing? I'm sure I won't undertake to guess," said the Shoddy-Princess, in a hard dry tone, which startled most of her hearers. "As there's only one man among ye, and he a lawyer, we'll take for granted it isn't much good you're after."

She looked sallow, wrinkled, care-worn; her large dark eyes, which were usually bright and attractive,



were sunken now, and their rims seemed reddened as though by tears.

"I'm sure you will pardon poor Mrs. Vivian, Mr. St. Helier," said Mary, in her usual calm soothing tone; "she is in much distress at this moment, and I had just persuaded her to come and ask you for your advice in a matter of which I feel myself incompetent to judge.

"My father went to the City this morning, and I ventured to suggest that we should call upon you, as immediate action of some kind must certainly be taken."

"Yes, that is sure," said Hilda, stepping up to Mary's side, but addressing herself to St. Helier. "I know—unfortunately I very well know, the trouble that was bringing these ladies to you; and their errand is the same as ours."

"If that is so," said St. Helier, considerably more perplexed than pleased, by the embarrassing fact that so many ladies suddenly required particular advice or assistance from him.

He was not a solicitor, and by no means a ladies' man. Women who wanted advice, legal or



other, should go to the proper offices where that article was dealt out in professional doses, and at professional charges. He did not want to be talked at, or to, just now; he wanted peace, and he wanted to talk himself, and to have only Estella to listen to all he might choose to say to her.

But Mary—gentle, dignified Mary,—*her* sister, his sister that was to be, had asked for his help in her friend's name. He could not refuse Mary—and Hilda?

Ah! Hilda had no doubt got herself into some trouble already, thanks to that unbusiness-like arrangement of hers, in which that great cad Latimer had a hand. Poor Hilda, how exquisitely she sang last night! how pale and grave she looked this morning! Well, if she had got into a scrape, he must help her, of course; nothing could be a trouble to him now, since his mind was quite made up, and his happiness perfectly assured.

“Shall we adjourn for consultation, ladies?” he asked, with a comprehensive bow.

Hilda took Mrs. Ashe's arm, and Mary that of Mrs. Vivian.



“My house and my services are quite at your disposal, ladies,” St. Helier said; and as the four walked towards the gate, he hastily turned to Estella and whispered, in a tone of urgent entreaty, “Wait for me here, my darling. I shall begin to lose faith in my too great happiness while you are out of my sight; and—and we must go and talk to father together soon, must we not?”

She answered him with a smile, but she thought it was very hard that *all* those women should want to talk business to him on the very day on which she felt he ought to be occupied about her and her only.

“And so I’m to congratulate you, to repress my tears of disappointment, and rejoice at the sacrifice of another girl of promise—eh, Miss Estella?”

It was Mrs. Toegoode who spoke, and who—the others having really left the Gardens—took Estella’s hands and gave her a kiss of warm approbation.

“I hope it wasn’t a secret, Stella?” enquired Nettie dubiously.

“No, Miss Baby,” said Adela-ida laughing, “or



if it was, Estella's eyes had betrayed it to me long before you divulged it."

"And what will become of our poor Gwendolen?" the authoress continued; "will she be handed to posterity minus an ear or a toe, like other great works of art, which seem to be valued in proportion to their incompleteness?"

"Oh! no," answered Estella with a happy smile, "I hope my heroine's members will none of them be conspicuous by their absence; and I am quite sure that not a single chapter shall be wanting which is necessary for the completion of the three volumes exacted by the publishers and the libraries."

"Well, child, I wish you joy; joy and all possible success," said Adela-ida cordially; "and if you can persuade that æsthetic friend of yours to stay in his charming house with *you* as the mistress of it, I will promise you both my blessing.

"I should feel it to be dreadfully hard to give up our pleasant confabs, our prosperous friendship," she continued earnestly.

"My lot in life has seemed so much brighter,



so much better and happier, since I have known you, child; and in my desire to help you on in your literary career, I have actually revived the flagging interest in my own work."

"I am sure the serial you have just commenced is wonderfully bright and entertaining," cried Estella eagerly, "and I take the very greatest interest in it, as you know."

"There are some splendid love scenes in it; Stella told me so," affirmed Nettie.

"And Stella must be a most experienced judge, no doubt," said the authoress laughing.

Estella said nothing; but she laughed too, and she thought that very likely she had a good deal more experience already than even Mrs. Toegoode gave her credit for.

What a wonderful plot she might suggest to Adela-ida now, if she were to tell her that awful story about the pretty woman who had told one man to marry her, while she had a husband living all the time!

Ah! Adela-ida would laugh at that, and say it was too absurd.



Yes, truth *is* stranger than fiction, concluded Estella, and wondered how much longer her hero would be detained listening to such truth or fiction as his self-constituted clients might choose to confide in him.

"Have you no idea what all this mystery with *him* is about, Stella?" queried Nettie impatiently.

"Not the very remotest, my Baby."

"Well, then, I think you were very silly, very—very silly not to insist on going with him too; what's to become of one meek, polite gentleman like that, if all those domineering women begin to lay down the law at the same time? He'll be utterly anni——; no, dumbfounded, I mean."

"As I am already, not by the talk of women, but by sheer physical exhaustion," said Mrs. Toe-goode.

"I'm starving, too," cried Nettie, remembering that it was luncheon time, now that the momentary excitement of the unexpected interview in the Gardens was over.

"Come in and have some luncheon at home,"



she suggested, glancing from her sister to the hungry authoress.

"I promised to stay here," said Estella, blushing delightfully.

"Then at once prove that you don't intend to be any man's slave, by following the first instinct of nature, which bids you eat while you're hungry," said Mrs. Toegoode decidedly.

"If you would please eat, and let me stand at the window and look out for—for them," suggested Estella, ingeniously changing the tell-tale pronoun from singular to plural.

"You shall do whatever you please, my child, so long as you don't insist upon our starving too."

With this the three quickly made their way to No. 40, where Chapman ministered to their wants with her usual zeal and discretion.



## CHAPTER XVII.

"THERE IS A TIDE IN THE AFFAIRS OF MEN."

MUCH startling news awaited Mr. Norman when he returned from the City that evening, and found Curtis awaiting him among the girls, each one of whom had her particular instalment of gossip to add to the general and very comprehensive account which Jonathan commenced for his chief's edification.

"Father, what do you think?" cried Nettie, scarcely allowing herself time to receive the usual paternal salute on her pouting lips, so eager was she to impart her "tit-bit of news," as she described it; "the Countess Dowager of Dewminster called here to-day with her prodigal son, the Honourable Mr. Raynewater. Isn't that an unexpected honour?"

"Did her ladyship come to see you, Miss Baby?" asked Mr. Norman smiling.



"Oh! dear, no;" said Nettie with an injured air, "no one comes for me, or cares about me when they do come."

"I beg your pardon, Nettie," commenced Jonathan, getting uncomfortably red at once. "I always—"

"Oh! yes, *you*," answered Nettie crossly, "but then you don't count, don't you see?"

"I often count on you, and never in vain," remarked Mary in her reassuring way, and poor Johnny thanked her with a surreptitious pressure of her hand.

They, at least, understood one another.

"It was 'Miss Estella,' both her ladyship and Master Ben were delighted to honour," Nettie resumed, glancing mischievously at her sister, who was sitting by the open window, apparently engrossed by a volume of poems which rested upon her knees.

"Mr. Raynewater is in love with our Stella," Nettie continued impressively. "He did not say so, you know, because his ma and our Polly and I were all in the room; but he showed it in his eyes, and



in his over-anxious ways, and he has made his ma promise to invite our Stella to come and spend a week or two with her, at her little place on the river."

Nice little place it must be to hold her dainty little self!

"Nettie, you are not sufficiently respectful, my child. When you allude to a Countess, you should speak of 'her ladyship'; it is her due," Mr. Norman remonstrated gently.

"I will," said Nettie, "and it sounds so much bigger too than just 'she' and 'her.' 'Her ladyship on the river' suggests a boat as big as a barge, to begin with—"

"You had better go, Baby, and see her ladyship in it," said Estella, looking up from her book.

"That plan would hardly meet Mr. Raynewater's views," said Mary, "it is an undeniable fact, father, that the young man is head over ears in love with our Stella, and her ladyship, who evidently adores this feckless youth, confessed the state of his heart to me in a whisper."

"Miss Theodosia Braun is going to commence



an action for breach of promise against Mr. Peregrine Latimer," said Estella, anxious to divert her father's attention from the idea of the Countess's son's aspirations.

"And there are other and far worse charges against Mr. Latimer already," said Jonathan.

"Oh! yes; he has robbed Mrs. Vivian," cried Nettie. "Ronald was here an hour ago and told us all about it, and he told *me*, not as a secret you know, or else I should not repeat it, of course; but he just whispered to me that Hilda had refused him, and told him that she loved her profession a thousand times better than all the men in the world.

"Ronald said that as he was sure she meant that, it would be very foolish of him to make himself unhappy about her any longer; and I told him it would be wicked of him to trouble about a girl who did not care a *sou* for him, when there were—— Oh! never mind what I said to him," Nettie suddenly exclaimed, checking herself as she found all the others eagerly watching her tell-tale face. "I managed to comfort him with my nonsensical



chatter, and that was the most important thing; for he went away smiling after all."

"Mr. Latimer has robbed Mrs. Vivian!" exclaimed Mr. Norman, whose mind was not adapted to rapid reception. "You be quiet for a minute, Baby dear, and just let Jonathan tell me what all this means."

Then Jonathan most circumstantially delivered himself of all the charges brought against Mr. Latimer by Mrs. Vivian, Hilda, and last, but by no means least, by Theodosia.

"*She* does not care about the money, however," said Johnny, by way of peroration, "but she is fully determined to wed the man; and if he makes any difficulties, now that she has told him he may keep the money and welcome, she will bring an action against him for breach of promise."

"Then may she win the day, and so promising a husband!" said Mr. Norman laughing; "no jury could possibly award those two a fitter punishment than to compel them to matrimony."

"He could not obey the jury in that case though, father," said Mary, "for he has a wife living here in



London at this moment, to whom he was married just five-and-twenty years ago."

Mary now proceeded to recapitulate the startling facts which Mrs. Ashe had told Mrs. Vivian and Hilda, at Mr. St. Helier's that morning. For Mrs. Ashe had been married to Latimer, then John Bell, just twenty-five years ago.

He was then in a responsible position, as sub-manager in a provincial bank. He had forged a signature, robbed his employers, been tried, convicted, and sent out to Western Australia for fourteen years; "that was before '64, of course," explained Jonathan, who had already heard this account of Mary's, and who now continued it in his own fashion.

"John Bell left his wife in the old country, of course, while he went to seek fresh fortunes in the new.

"He escaped three years after his arrival, made his way to the sheep-farming districts, prospered, and turned up in London again, a wiser and a white-haired, though perhaps not a better, man."

"And his wife?" asked Mr. Norman, who felt as



if the Gardens had suddenly been turned into a recreation-ground for lunatics, escaped forgers, frantic spinsters, deserted wives, widows with husbands, etc. He was literally afraid to think any further on so painful a subject.

“His wife ran away with another man,” said Mary very quietly, “but she repents her follies and her faults now—”

“Good Lord! you don’t mean to say that *she* is in the Gardens too!” exclaimed Mr. Norman uneasily; “really, girls, if this sort of thing is going on I must insist upon your not going into the Gardens at all in future.”

“You will trust Mary and me to look after them, Mr. Norman—*father*, won’t you?” said Jonathan, laying his hand on his revered Mary’s, and leading her towards her father.

“I’m only three years older than he is, father dear,” pleaded Mary, looking about fifteen in her sudden blushing bashfulness, “and Johnny thinks we shall all be happier if, if—”

“If our Mary can be elevated to the important



rank of a *married woman*, by becoming Mrs. Curtis, eh?"

Mr. Norman laughed quite cheerfully as a gleam of something like reliable light flashed upon him through the bewildering clouds of mystification, with which the gossippy news he had listened to for the last half-hour had filled his brain.

Estella, who knew all about Mary and Jonathan's intention, was now occupied in making certain signals from the window to a gentleman who was seated on a campstool in the Gardens, and who now, in answer to her summons, stepped into the drawing-room.

"I think I shall be well taken care of too, father dear," said Estella, laying her hand upon St. Helier's arm, "and with—with Everard to look after me, you'll trust me in the Gardens too, won't you?"

"We parted in haste and anger once, Mr. Norman," said St. Helier, smiling; "you won't refuse me your hand now, I hope, since your generous daughter has promised me hers—for life."

"Oh! father! could anything be more touching, more charming, more romantic, more like a delicious



novel than that?" cried Nettie, rapturously, "now you have only to say 'Bless—bless you my children,' and pretend to sprinkle some rose-water over their heads."

Mr. Norman took St. Helier's hand into his with a cordial grasp.

"I am very thankful and very happy," he said, and went away to seat himself by the window.

Too much seemed to have happened to him within the last hour. *Two* daughters to be given away out of this happy home of theirs; what would become of him in the solitude of this great London house?

"I'm not going to run away from you just yet though, father," said the Baby, kneeling on the floor by his side.

It seemed as though she had divined his thoughts.

"You must never leave me, my Baby, my own little one," he said, and felt quite injured as he heard the plaintive inflection of his own voice.

"I can't promise that, father darling," said Nettie, quite bravely, "but I will promise to stay



with you one whole year for certain—the year of my Ronald's probation," she added solemnly. "You see, I don't think he quite knows his own mind yet, so I have begged him to go away for a year, and by the time he comes back—"

Her father listened to her, quite as much astonished by her extreme solemnity as by the news she was imparting to him about the arrangements she, his Baby, his little giddy chatterbox, had made for herself and her future husband.

"Mrs. Vivian is in dreadful trouble about this horrid Latimer man, and about the money he has stolen," Nettie continued, still whispering, "and I want to persuade him, my Ronald, you know, to take his mother over to the States and let them put all her money matters straight again there.

"He and I talked over the preliminaries in the Gardens this afternoon, before he called here that was, and to-morrow I know I can quite convince him, if I tell him that *you* approve of my plan."

"I shall certainly approve of any plan, Nettie, which leaves you at home with your poor lonely old father, and lets me find *you* unchanged at least,



and as bright and cheerful, and as much my Baby as ever."

"But you are not going to be left poor and lonely at all, father dear, dear father," said Estella, who had caught sight of his dejected face.

"The only change will be for your aggrandizement, for you will have good sons as well as naughty daughters now, and two houses instead of one.

"The grand one in the Gardens, of which Mrs. Curtis will do the honours for you; and the little one in the Grove, to which you will come for rest and æsthetic relaxation, when the matter-of-fact tyrants here bully you beyond even your powers of patient endurance."

"And in the Grove, Mrs. St. Helier intends to put me through a course of training in the Fine Arts?" said Mr. Norman, smiling. "Ah! my poor Stella, you will find your aged pupil but a very sorry subject for the experiments necessary to the new-fangled notions of culture."

"I am not going to turn schoolmistress, father,"



laughed Estella, looking brighter and happier than her father ever remembered to have seen her. "I am going to be a very diligent pupil, and to finish my novel straight away now, for I have found a plot in real life for it, a master-mind to guide me."

"And a real hero for the plot and yourself, my Stella?" asked he who had so long been her secret hero already.

She laid her hands in his as he spoke, and lifted her sweet lips to his for the kiss which, given and accepted there, in her father's presence, seemed to sanctify the clandestine betrothal to which she had consented under the old oak in the Gardens that morning.

And he, her hero?

Even as he kissed her with that kiss of betrothal, he felt in his heart what a sorry hero he had in truth been, while her admiring love had so exalted him . . . .

But his was a noble and generous nature, and he resolved that, in future at least, he should prove



himself thoroughly worthy of that high place in his sweet love's regard, of which she had from the first deemed him completely deserving.

Is there more to be said?

Perhaps a few explanatory words to such readers as utterly disdain to read aught between the lines.

Mrs. Toegoode's pretty sister Ada, whom we have only seen much veiled as Mrs. Ashe, had married John Bell before he became a forger and convict.

During her lord's temporary absence, she had tempted young Everard St. Helier to run away from his home and his duties with her.

When St. Helier had discovered the disgraceful facts connected with the woman whom he had thought to make his wife, he left her in Rome, where they had been living, and where she fell a victim to the virulent small-pox, which under ignorant and careless treatment had robbed her of her only treasure—her beauty.

Her sister Adela-ida, who was in Rome at the



time, heard of the unfortunate creature's destitute and abandoned condition, but utterly refused to go near the infected house.

She, however, communicated with the kind, sad maiden lady, her aunt, Miss Trevor, who, like a true Samaritan, went over to the City on the Hills, tended and watched over her unhappy niece, and brought her back into the ways, if not of pleasantness, at least—of peace.

It was but on the day after Hilda's *début*, just as Ronald and Jonathan had left Grenfell Street, that Ada Bell, being alone in the house with the Signorina, was compelled to answer an imperious rat-tat at the door, which she opened to—her husband.

She recognised him more by his voice than by his appearance, for the years which had blanched his raven locks had made other considerable changes too, though nought could detract from the man's imposing proportions.

He looked at her, suppressed a shudder, and recognised her?—not at all.



Was he bent on robbing or doing any sort of harm to Hilda, her gracious, generous, kind and gentle friend? That was Mrs. Ada Bell's instant and terrifying thought, and it led her to tell Hilda the truth as soon as her unsuspecting, but much suspected visitor had departed.

The results that followed this information, and the consequent visit to Mr. St. Helier, have been written of upon the lines, and need no further explanation.

There is but another paragraph due to our good-hearted unfortunate friend the Hausfrau Braun, who spent a very sad evening in her lonely great house in the Gardens, while her neighbours at No. 40 were all rejoicing.

For Mrs. Braun felt herself deserted and broken-hearted.

Her daughter, her darling Dosie had abandoned her, and fled from London and from England—with her lover, Peregrine Latimer. . . . .

Last Christmas, 1878, Mrs. Braun received a long letter from Canada, in answer to which she sent away a Bank of England note for £50, enclosed



in a sheet of paper on which she had written these lines:—

“Mein Dosie,

“De money wat I send to-day is mein for you. Wat remane of your's shall not be touch until you come for it your one self. So it will gro, and so it may gro till the grass is grün on my grave; vile I have one penny, de half of him is always your one, mein poor darling, and vile I live, de half mein home and all mein love is your one too, my beloved and much onhappy child. Belief in the onchangin' love of your mother.”

When Hilda wrote to Ronald, “*Ars longa, vita brevis est*,” she had fully resolved to devote her life, however short it might be, to the steady pursuit of that art to which she now felt herself irrevocably wedded.

Nor could even Lord Goselyngge's repeated and earnest entreaties alter her resolution.

The only man who could have hoped to vie with Art for the possession of the singer's devoted allegiance, had promised his name, his faith and



his love to another, and so the lyric stage has not been robbed as yet of this queen of song, who is always the most welcome guest, as she has proved herself the most faithful friend, of that happy æsthetic couple now living in the *Multum in Parvo* of Little Grenfell Grove.

THE END.



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always the most welcome guest, as she has proved  
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singing couple now living in the Atlantic in the  
of Little, Greenell Grove.

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PRINTING OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHER.

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Buxton, Bertha H.

Great Grenfell gardens a novel

Bd.: 2

Leipzig 1879

P.o.angl. 51 f-5/6

urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11391233-8